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**PROTESTANTISM'S FUNCTION
IN THE ETHNIC MINORITY REGIONS IN VIETNAM
AT PRESENT**

***Abstract:** Protestantism has recently become a growing religious community and increasingly has had an important role in the social, economic and cultural life of ethnic minorities. Protestantism is transmitting its values to social life in ethnic minority areas through its functions such as education, social adjustment, social cohesion and social support. These values are suitable with the traditional culture, with the values of the new age, with the Party's and the State's policies and guidelines so it needs to promote them in order to contribute to the social stability, solidarity, tolerance and sustainable development.*

***Keywords:** Protestantism; function; ethnic minorities; Vietnam.*

Introduction

Recently, Protestantism has developed fast in ethnic minority areas due to many reasons¹. According to the statistics, Protestantism had about 15,000 baptized followers in a total of 60,000 followers in the Central Highlands - South Trường Sơn and a small group of the Yao people in Bắc Sơn district, Lạng Sơn province in 1975. By 2015, the number of ethnic minority believers in the Central Highlands, South Trường Sơn and Central Coast provinces has reached over 600,000 people with the density of local churches and groups, and the Hmong Protestant community in the North has approximately 200,000 believers (180,000 in the northern mountainous provinces and nearly 40,000 migrants to the Central Highlands), the ethnic minority Protestants account for 2/3 of more than 1 million Protestants in Vietnam.

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Currently, Protestantism has been conveying its values to ethnic minority areas through a number of functions such as education, social adjustment, social links, social support and an increase of its role and status in the social, economic and cultural life of ethnic minorities.

1. Function of education

The main function of education is teaching the values of Protestantism to believers and communities, including beliefs and practices of the truths of Protestants.

Since the beginning, Protestant missionaries have targeted on ethnic minority areas. They used simple, appropriate evangelistic methods to convey the values of Protestantism such as faith in God, the Bible through the image of Jesus to ethnic minority areas.

Teaching the Bible is always maintained at places of religious activities of Protestants in ethnic minority areas. In addition to the weekly activity on Sunday, ethnic minority Protestants also gather to learn the words of God through the Bible, sing hymns every evening. The data of the survey at Bắc Sơn Protestant Church, Lạng Sơn province showed that children from two years old were gathered to learn Bible in church every Sunday.

According to figures conducted by the Institute for Religious Studies, the proportion of Protestants who were taught by the Church and their families about faith in God (95.4%) and worship God only (87.7%)).

In addition to faith, ethnic minority Protestants have also focused on moral education on the basis of teaching faith for their children.

Table 1: The content believers teach children

Content of teaching	Frequency (person)	Percentage (%)
Worship God only	171	87.7
Join Mass on Sundays	167	85.6
Filial piety	168	85.7
No killing human beings	147	75.4
No adultery	147	75.0
No theft	148	75.5

Thus, through teaching children and grandchildren about faith, ethnic minority Protestants are also interested in teaching their children commandments concerning morality and lifestyle.

Protestants are also educated in norms such as living in harmony, loving each other (91.4%), cultivating personal morality (81.2%), equal behavior without discrimination rich and poor (82.2%), being good and doing good deeds (87.8%), frugal lifestyle (78.2%), diligence in working (76.1%). The results are shown in the following table.

Table 2: Protestantism teaches people

Protestantism teaches people	Frequency (person)	Percentage (%)
Believing in God	188	95.4
Living in harmony, loving each other	180	91.4
Cultivating personal morality	160	81.2
Equal behavior without discrimination rich and poor	162	82.2
Being good and doing good deeds	173	87.8
Frugal lifestyle	154	78.2
Hard working	150	76.1

It can be said that the educational content of the Protestantism has many similarities with the traditional morality of the Vietnamese. In addition to teaching followers the faith in God, Protestantism focuses on the universal moral values such as living in harmony, loving each other, doing good deeds, self-cultivating, etc. in the process of evangelizing.

Besides, the educational role of the Protestantism in ethnic minority areas is also assessed and recognized through the changes of backward habits and customs of residents. Based on fieldwork and depth interviews with dignitaries, followers as well as local government officials, the collected data shows that “Protestantism advocates no drinking alcohol, no smoking and fidelity, so the life of people has had positive changes, economy has been more developed in many areas where Protestantism have penetrated” - (depth interviews with local officials, Dak Lak province). The quantitative survey data also shows these changes in the Protestant ethnic minority as follows:

Table 3: Have you ever done the following things?

	Frequency (person)	Percentage (%)
Smoking	3	1.5
Drinking alcohol	12	6.1
Gambling	2	1.0
Drug using	0	0
Swearing, fighting	5	2.5
Premarital sex	3	1.5

Despite certain errors in the survey questionnaire as well as the fear of admitting to violating the Commandments of respondents (believers), it is clear that Protestantism has a significant role in educating led to behavioral change of followers. And through the educational function, the Vietnamese Protestantism has conveyed its values to individuals and social communities.

2. Function of social adjustment

Research on the Protestant community showed that Protestant organizations and behavior of believers have influence in ethnic minority areas. Accordingly, the moral values of Protestantism might bring progress to these regions.

The value of the truth of Protestantism with a theological perspective is expressed in three basic things such as “God only”, “the Bible only” and “Grace only”. This is a relatively new theological perspective (for ethnic minorities) leading to a change in their religious practice. The social adjustment function of Protestantism is clearly reflected through changes in the culture and society of ethnic minority areas.

In the book “Thần đạo học” - a series of books has been used by the Evangelical Church of Vietnam as a theological textbook, Dr. John Drange Olsen stated that Christians must separate themselves from people and things that are not worthy of Christianity, they will be become an adult of God, given the Holy Spirit and sanctified by Christ”.

The Constitution of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam in 1928 indicated that “Behavior, lifestyle of believers must be consistent with the teachings of the Bible. They are not allowed to worship ancestors,

gods and other superstitions. Believers are not allowed to use, trade or exchange items that contradict the principles of the Gospel, such as opium, alcohol, cigarettes and objects used to worship like idols”.

This theological perspective has created a new lifestyle for Protestants. They have ruptured the old customs which are considered as superstitious, bad habits, are not worthy of Christianity. Christians are taught things like do not worship other gods, do not bow to idols. Therefore, they do not perform acts of worship other gods and idols, do not bow the bodies of the deceased, including relatives, do not pray before the ancestral altar, do not attend the worship activities at the spiritual places of the Vietnamese community such as communal temples, pagodas, temples.

The new lifestyle of Protestants contradicts traditional customs and beliefs of Vietnamese people in general and ethnic minorities in particular. The Ethnic minorities in Vietnam have a rich spiritual culture with many unique and diverse types.

In the reports on the religion and belief in localities throughout the country, many reports emphasized that the evangelicalization of Protestantism in ethnic minority areas has erased the cultural identity and the traditional religion. There are two questions such as whether Protestantism is a major factor in losing the cultural identity of ethnic minorities or not, and if Protestantism does not appear, will ethnic minorities retain their traditional cultural religious identity?

The fact showed that Protestantism has developed rapidly in ethnic minority areas due to social institutions, the situation of living has changed led to a change in the awareness of ethnic minorities.

Through the field survey, we found that there has also been a gradual disappearance of cultural identities among the ethnic minorities who do not believe in Protestantism due to changes in living conditions, some ethnic minority people have self-awareness that some practices need to be changed to adapt to new living conditions as propaganda by the Party, the State officials.

Nguyễn Văn Nam stated that the behavioral method of some evangelistic times and characteristics of Protestantism has had a profound impact on the culture and lifestyles of ethnic minorities. In the past, missionaries have eliminated superstition, abolished old practices (both good and bad), consequently, people demolished or threw away gongs. This is a real problem, but the decline in traditional values in the Central Highlands is relatively common in many places, among many ethnic groups, many villages, not only in places where Protestantism exists. Like many other regions in the country, the Central Highlands society in the past few decades has been in a turbulent period, changed in many aspects. The market economy and new life are growing, the ethnic minorities in general and young people in particular have access to material life, utilities of modern society and external cultural resources so a part of them has neglected their tradition, customs and culture, it is inevitable².

Protestantism has evangelized when the ethnic minorities have been gradually changing their awareness, wishing to find “a new road”. At the same time, Protestantism is a modern religion and closely linked with the market economy, which partly meets the needs of the current spiritual life of people so it is easily received.

Research on ethnic minority Protestants, it can not deny the positive impact of Protestantism there. When evangelizing in ethnic minority areas, most missionaries advised things that are in accordance with civilized life such as eliminating backward customs; expensive worship; practicing progressive lifestyle, hygiene, going to the hospital when having sickness, without alcohol and gambling addiction, living monogamous life. In addition, the ethnic minority Protestants are also taught how to organize, arrange business, a saving of money.

This is confirmed by many researchers. Nguyen Van Thang stated that Protestantism upholds the progress so it helps the Hmong people easily abandon backwardness and acquire advancement. In fact, there have been positive impacts on the socio-economic development of the Mong people when giving up traditional belief, converting to

Protestantism. For example, the Hmong Protestants abandon backward practices, encourage their children to go to school at higher levels, use herbal medicine and modern medicine to cure diseases, well implement the policy on family planning, removal of social issues such as quarrel and fight, drug abuse, alcohol addiction, theft, etc.³

Comments on the influence of Protestantism, the authors of the work *Protestantism and the stable development in the ethnic minority area in Lam Dong province* stated that “In fact, there have been positive changes in terms of culture and society in many Protestant areas in Lam Dong, which is mainly ethnic minority area. Protestants encourage their children to go to school. This is also one of the factors that motivates people to remove backward customs and habits of worship, funerals, marriage and promote the progressive ideas in the campaign to build cultural life in residential areas which has not been successful for a long time. In a certain aspects, Protestantism propagates things in accordance with the policy on monogamy, hygiene, saving, without stealing, alcohol, gambling, medical care at the hospital and clinics. Protestants give up alcohol and smoking, they know how to save food. Protestantism also educates them morality, teaches children the politeness, personal hygiene”⁴.

Recently, in some places, Protestant missionaries also encourage the preservation of the values of ethnic cultural heritage, establishing faithful communities with their own identity. They are more interested in organizing cultural life on the basis of promoting typical values of ethnic groups. They encourage believers to wear traditional costumes when attending church, ceremony, praying; to restore community activities such as water worship ceremony, gong festival; guiding the young believers to learn and to perform gongs and traditional musical instruments along with festivals and dances that imbued with ethnic identity⁵.

There have been significant adjustments in the society of the ethnic minority Protestants.

In ethnic minority regions, the village is a sustainable traditional social institution, a spiritual fulcrum for individuals.

A village operates under self-management on the basis of customary law. These are social conventions and rules that guide behavior, determine criminal acts according to the cultural traditions of the inhabitants, keep order and regulate social relations. Customary law is not only valuable when judging but it is also a “guideline” for advice and guidance to help people live in accordance with the tradition of their ancestors.

Each village gathers many families, individuals, clans. The clans create a common relationship among relatives. People of the same lineage often gather together, sometimes aggregate residents to a group.

The village elder is considered as the leader of a village. This person is also the spiritual leader of the community. Since ancient times, the elder has taught and managed children and grandchildren to do good deeds for community, dealt with conflicting cases, disputes of clans, relatives from young to old in the village, helped people understand each other, live peacefully. It means that the village patriarch has contributed to stabilizing the society.

After the introduction of Protestantism, the prestige of village elders and village leaders in many ethnic minority communities has been reduced. They lost their status as a spiritual leader where Protestantism expanded. The role of prestigious class in the Protestant ethnic minority areas has been replaced by a new class who are young and middle age, actively evangelize. It contributes to change social institutions in ethnic minority areas.

In fact, Protestant dignitaries have a profound effect on the community. Survey data indicated that the majority of Protestants often ask for advices from pastors, missionaries and members of management Board (các thành viên trong Ban Chấp sự) when facing with difficulties in life. This rate is much higher than the rate of meeting the village elders and village leaders. It also showed the loss of status of village patriarchs and village leaders in the ethnic minority community at present.

Table 4: Protestants in the Central Highlands ask for advice when facing difficulties

Who will you ask for advice when you have difficulties in life and faith	Frequency (people)	Rate (%)
Relatives	246	64.2
Neighbors	133	34.7
Village elders, village chiefs	120	31.3
Pastors, missionaries and members of Management Board	332	86.7
Government officials of the village	115	30.0
Others	79	20.6

(Source: *Institute for Religious Studies*)⁶

According to our research, only 11.8% of respondents said that they have consulted with the village patriarch and village chiefs when facing difficulties. However, the advice of village elders and village leaders, meeting the needs of the questioners, is only 9.4%.

Table 5: The role of village patriarchs/village leaders in believers' lives

Content	Frequency (people)	Rate (%)
Consulting with village patriarchs and village leaders when encountering difficulties	23	11.8
Usefulness of village elders and village leaders' opinions to believers	18	9.4

3. Function of social cohesion

Protestantism has created linked groups through participating in Protestant rituals. This participation creates the bond between the members, as well as, conveys moral values in the community. It leads to solidarity and social unity of believers who have the same faith and practice the same ritual, being gathered in a moral community, in the organization of the Church; creates high unity of group like a miniature social machine.

This link will become even stronger when the faith of the Protestants is increasingly deep. For the Vietnamese Protestants, this link has been strengthened, in recent years, as the faith of the

Protestants is becoming stronger and deeper. The sociological surveys of the Protestant communities such as the Coho, the Rade, the Yao and the Tày people in Dak Lak, Lam Dong and Lang Son provinces showed that the majority of respondents worship God only, accounting for 98.0% of the total respondents.

The faith is expressed by religious practices such as attending church, worshipping God, sharing God's word, reading the Bible, praying, etc. Our survey showed that most communities complied with regulations of the Church [the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North)] on the religious practices. It showed the deep faith of Protestants. The rate of respondents who had a regular meeting for worshipping God (several times a week, once a week) accounts for a high rate of 50.5% and 35.7%, reading the Bible (daily and several times a week) accounts for 45.2% and 34.5%, praying (daily and several times a week) accounts for 78.1% and 14.8%, participating in gender group activities (several times a week and once a week) accounts for 29.4% and 33.0%, singing hymns to praise God (daily, several times a week and once a week) accounts for 21.8%, 33% and 32.0%.

Protestantism in ethnic minority areas has become a spiritual support for the communities there.

**Table 6: Interests brought by Protestantism
in term of spiritual support**

Interests of Protestantism	Frequency (people)	Rate (%)
Protestantism provides spiritual support for believers	162	82.2
Protestantism teaches people to live in harmony and love each other	180	91.4

Protestantism has been meeting the spiritual needs of a part of Protestant in ethnic minority areas. According to survey data, 90.9% of respondents said that they attended church because they believed that they were saved and received many blessings; 52.0% said that they went to church because it was an indispensable spiritual need; 37.1% said they went to church because they were able to talk, sing, and have

fun. Only 10.2% of the respondents answered that they attended church because of simple and less expensive rituals and 3.0% said that they went to church because they were helped and material sharing.

Through religious activities they have also created a community that engages, loves and helps each other in daily life. Most respondents believed that Protestantism teaches people to live in harmony and love each other.

Research on Protestantism in Lam Dong, Le Minh Quang stated that the presence of the Protestantism in the ethnic minority area has formed concentrated, stable communities for religious activities. Stable living has led to improvement in their economic life, at the same time, it has limited the practice of shifting cultivation, nomadic farming, burning forest for cultivation, where there are permanent churches, residents live in concentration and have stable production⁷.

The function of social link of Protestantism has really worked within the Protestant community, forming a community of faith, helping each other in life.

However, because of contradictions between faith and religious practices of Protestants and the traditional culture and beliefs of ethnic minorities, it sometimes creates conflicts between Protestant community and non-Protestant community. In some places, Protestantism leads to division, differentiation among ethnic minority communities, between believers of traditional religion and Protestants. The infiltration of Protestantism has touched traditional relations and values that have led to the reaction of those who believe in the traditional religion. Protestants gave up their ancestors worship, abandoned customary obligations, did not participate in festivals. Those actions were condemned by believers of traditional religion. They claimed Protestants trampled on ancestors. In contrast, Protestants thought that it is backward if they do not follow Protestantism. This differentiation and contradiction did not only take place in the village and commune but it also occurred at the family and clan of the ethnic groups. There was a dissonance among generations: parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, husbands and wives, among children⁸.

Vương Duy Quang stated that “There is a gap between believers of Vàng Trứ religion and people who do not follow. It causes internal divisions of the ethnic group and actions that shattered the community of families, clans and villages. Vàng Trứ’s followers claim to have a “new path” and call people who do not follow “people who eat raw food, have a long tail”. People who worship ancestors call Vàng Chú’s followers as “a betrayal of the ethnic reason”⁹.

Recently, conflicts as mentioned above have also changed significantly. In the surveyed localities, most of the Protestant groups (granted a registration) were stable, no longer conflict between the Protestant community and other communities. Protestants and non-Protestants have a normal relationship with each other. Protestants attend the events of non-Protestants’ family such as funerals, weddings but they do not participate in worshiping and eat offerings.

4. Function of social support

Protestantism performs its social support function according to the value of love in the Bible such as “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39) “Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise” (Luca 3:10). Ethnic minority Protestants are also interested in charitable activities in the community.

Table 7: The charitable activities of Protestantism

Content	Frequency (people)	Rate (%)
The Church has charitable activities	179	90.9
Believers used to help the poor	171	87.2

Charitable activities are carried out through works such as supporting money, clothes, blankets. According to survey data, 71.0% of respondents said that they helped the poor by money, 24.5% supported the poor by belongings, 37.3% helped the poor by visiting and encouraging them. In 2009, on the occasion of Christmas and Lunar New Year, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) had charitable activities such as giving gifts to children, visiting disadvantaged people or illness with a total of over 5,000 gifts¹⁰.

In terms of health care, Protestantism contributes to helping believers improve their knowledge of health care. Protestants did not believe that people were sick by ghosts so they did not invite a mystery man pray for treatment, they came to medical stations and medical facilities.

The survey results showed that the majority of respondents did not invite the mystery men to worship ghosts when family members were sick (96.4%), praying (81.2%) and going clinics, hospitals (92.3%).

Conclusion

The foundation of truth is faith in God, in the Bible with the ideal model is Jesus, Protestants find a spiritual bond. Therefore, they practiced God's teachings on morality and lifestyle or participated in charitable organizations with voluntary spirit. The conscience of every pious believer urges them to apply their commandments to their lives without any legal sanctions.

Through the functions of education, social adjustment, social cohesion and social support, Protestantism has conveyed its values to social life in ethnic minority areas. These values have some points in accordance with the traditional culture, the value of the new era, the guidelines and policies of the Party and the State. They need to be promoted in order to create social stability, solidarity, tolerance and sustainable development. /.

NOTES:

- 1 Vũ Thị Thu Hà (2014), "Nguyên nhân đạo Tin Lành phát triển nhanh trong vùng đồng bào dân tộc thiểu số ở Việt Nam hiện nay" (The causes led to the rapid development of Protestantism in ethnic minority areas in Vietnam today), *Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo*, N^o. 8: 112.
- 2 Nguyễn Văn Nam (2012), *Quá trình truyền giáo của đạo Tin Lành tại Tây Nguyên và những tác động đa chiều đến văn hóa, lối sống của đồng bào dân tộc thiểu số tại đây*, (*Evangelization of Protestantism in the Central Highlands and multi-dimensional impacts on the culture and lifestyles of ethnic minorities there*). Seminar on Protestantism and Vietnamese culture, Hà Nội.
- 3 Nguyễn Văn Thắng (2009), *Giữ "lý cũ" hay theo "lý mới" (Preserving "old reason" or following "new reason")*, Nxb. Khoa học xã hội, Hà Nội: 166.
- 4 Công an tỉnh Lâm Đồng (2014), "Đạo Tin Lành và việc ổn định phát triển trong vùng đồng bào dân tộc thiểu số tỉnh Lâm Đồng" (Protestantism and stable development in the ethnic minority areas of Lam Dong province): 72.
- 5 Nguyễn Văn Nam, *ibid.*

- 6 Số liệu điều tra thuộc Đề tài cấp Nhà nước *Vấn đề tôn giáo trong phát triển bền vững Tây Nguyên* do Viện Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo chủ trì thực hiện năm 2013-2014. (Survey data of the State-level Project: *Religious issue in sustainable development of the Central Highlands* conducted by the Institute for Religious Studies in 2013-2014)
- 7 Lê Minh Quang (2010), *Đạo Tin Lành ở Lâm Đồng* (Protestantism in Lam Dong province), tham luận Tọa đàm bàn tròn *Quá trình phát triển của đạo Tin Lành ở Việt Nam từ năm 1911 đến năm 1975*, (The development of Protestantism in Vietnam from 1911 to 1975), Hà Nội: 8.
- 8 Công an tỉnh Lâm Đồng (2014), “Đạo Tin Lành và việc ổn định phát triển trong vùng đồng bào dân tộc thiểu số tỉnh Lâm Đồng” (Protestantism and stable development in the ethnic minority areas of Lam Dong province): 75.
- 9 Vương Duy Quang (2005), *Văn hóa tâm linh của người Hmông ở Việt Nam truyền thống và hiện tại*, (The spiritual culture of the Hmong in Vietnam in tradition and at present), Nxb. Văn hóa Thông tin, Hà Nội: 195.
- 10 Ngọc Huyền (2010), “Đồng đạo chức sắc, bà con tín hữu Tin Lành Việt Nam (Miền Bắc) yên tâm sinh hoạt tôn giáo” (Dignitaries, Protestants of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) are assured of religious activities), *Công tác Tôn giáo*, số 1+2: 39.

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4. *Kinh Thánh Cựu ước và Tân ước*, bản dịch 2011 (2015), Nxb. Tôn giáo, Hà Nội.
5. Nguyễn Văn Nam (2012), *Quá trình truyền giáo của đạo Tin Lành tại Tây Nguyên và những tác động đa chiều đến văn hóa, lối sống của đồng bào dân tộc thiểu số tại đây*, (Evangelization of Protestantism in the Central Highlands and multi-dimensional impacts on the culture and lifestyles of ethnic minorities there). Seminar on Protestantism and Vietnamese culture, Hà Nội.
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