

An Analysis of Factors in the Rise of Buddhist-Catholic Marriages in Vietnam

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Abstract-Theresearch analyses major factors in the recent rise of Buddhist-Catholic marriages in Vietnam. Following a brief introduction to the religions in Vietnam, it provides a historical overview of Buddhist-Catholic relations, discussing the major political events that influenced them. The researchalso presents the first recorded case of a Buddhist-Catholic marriage in Vietnam and the increase of Buddhist-Catholic marriages in contemporary Vietnam, particularly in Ho Chi Minh City and Dong Nai province. The revival of religions, the effect of the model of secular government on religion, the impact of immigration waves to the South, and a change of popular attitudes towards traditional family life are four main factors that make the increase of Buddhist-Catholic marriages in relation to modern development in Vietnamese society.

Keywords-Inter-faith, Buddhist, Catholic, Marriage

1 INTRODUCTION

Vietnam, a Southeast Asian country located at the crossroads between two ancient civilizations, India and China, has had ample opportunities to absorb ideas, cultures, and religions from foreign countries. Many major religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Catholicism, and Islam¹in the world have flowed into Vietnam in turn.

Apart from accepting such major 'world' religions as Buddhism and Christianity, Vietnam has given birth to numerous religious traditions during its history. Various religious movements have originated in Vietnam based on traditional folklore and indigenous beliefs. It is noteworthy that all of these domestic religious traditions emerged in the Southern region,² These includes Khất Sĩ, Cao Đài (Caodaism), Hòa Hảo, Tịnh Độ Cư Sĩ, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, and so on.

Although there are various religions and indigenous traditions practiced in Vietnam, this research mainly focuses on Buddhism and Roman Catholicism, because, in term of numbers, they are the two largest religions in the country today. Their adherents exist in all regions of the country from North to South. Buddhist-Catholic marriages are quite common amongst the Vietnamese. However, differences of teachings between Buddhism and Catholicism, and between practices of Vietnamese Buddhists and Catholics in the past, have created difficulties and complications in their marriages. The present research therefore analyses

major reasons for the rise of interfaith marriage in general and Buddhist-Catholic intermarriages in particular in Vietnam today.

2 Historical Overview of Buddhist-Catholic Relations in Vietnam

2.1 The Introduction of Buddhism into Vietnam

According to historical records, Buddhism first spread to Vietnam in the first century CE via Indian merchants and monks who sought trade ties with the Vietnamese. Buddhist teachings, those of the Mahayana strand, which was prominent in India in the early years of the Christian era, had a remarkable influence on the Vietnamese.

Buddhism has been predominant throughout the history of Vietnam. Pure land and Zen are the two main Mahayana schools most widespread within Vietnam today. The combination of Zen and Pure Land is the main tradition for the majority of Vietnamese Buddhists. Theravada Buddhism, on the other hand, is practiced by a minority of people in Southern and central Vietnam. Particularly, it is mainly developed in the Southern Delta region of Vietnam.³

Through its long history Buddhism is firmly rooted in many aspects of the culture and spirit of the Vietnamese. Thus Buddhism has become the innerreligious life of the Vietnamese and has been actively and lively practiced in their daily lives. Buddhism is also frequently interwoven with folk religious beliefs. This has increased the number of Buddhists in the South, making Buddhism the most widely practiced tradition in Vietnam. Today, Buddhism is

¹For more on the religions practiced in Vietnam, see Nguyen Hong Duong, *Diversity of Religion in Vietnam*.

<http://www.vjol.info/index.php/RSREV/article/viewFile/9636/8887>

²Epidemic, natural calamity, wild animals which threatened people's lives and social oppression are reasons for the emergence of a number of new religious movements in the Southern region before 1975, aiming at saving human life. (Mac Duong, "Characteristics of Belief and Religion in Southern Region of Vietnam in the Ethnological-Religious Approach," *Religious Studies Review*, Vol. 2, No.3, October 2008, p.18)

³See more Theravada Buddhism in Vietnam in: Nguyen T. Minh, *Buddhist Monastic Education and regional Revival Movements in Early Twentieth Century Vietnam*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2007, pp. 76-80

considered the biggest religion in Vietnam with registered followers of over 10 million.⁴

2.2 The Arrival of Catholicism

Catholicism came to Vietnam much later than Buddhism. It was first introduced in 1553 and disseminated through the work of French missionaries around the seventeenth century. Catholic historians often use the year 1553 as the milestone for the presence of Catholicism in Vietnam.⁵ However, it was not until the third decade of the seventeenth century that the Catholic mission really took off. It was only in the nineteenth century that the Catholic Church in Vietnam had developed into a well-organized institution.⁶

The dissemination of Catholicism in Vietnam was not as smooth as that of other religions. When it was introduced, Catholicism did not get much sympathy from the natives. It was seen as linked closely with the French invasion motivation and was prohibited by the Nguyen Court.⁷ In terms of politics, Roman Catholics and Roman Catholicism and its followers are still considered even today by many as being foreign and antinational, historically directly responsible for colonization.⁸

Despite the negative perception which non-Catholic Vietnamese have had of Catholics, the Vietnamese Catholic Church has made a number of contributions to Vietnamese society in the fields of ethics, culture, education, social welfare, charity, and people's spiritual lives. One of the most notable contributions of Catholicism to Vietnamese culture was from Alexander de Rhodes (1591-1660), a French Jesuit missionary. He developed an alphabet for the Vietnamese language, using the Latin script with added diacritic marks. It is still in use and is now referred to as '*Quốc ngữ*', literally "national language".

The organizational system and method of preaching and advantages in economy have been major factors in the successful mission of Catholicism in Vietnam. The organizational system of the Catholic Church is very strict and consistent from the central to local levels.⁹ Sections in the parishes of the Church are organized highly solidly.

The Church manages their adherents well through its theocracy (religious power) and highly-developed disciplines. In a typical Vietnamese Catholic family, all members of the family are baptized as devoted Catholics.

The development of Catholicism is regarded as an 'oil-slick'; it has gradually infiltrated into and become strongly rooted in the land of Vietnam.¹⁰ In the first instance, Catholicism mostly developed in the Northern and central rural coastal areas. Only after more than four centuries of missions, Catholicism has developed throughout the country and attracted a large number of people professing its faith. Its popularity has increased significantly. In 1850, there were 500,000 Vietnamese Catholics, in 1910: 900,000, and in 1945: about 1.5 million.¹¹ At present, with a number of approximately 6 million believers (nearly 8% of population),¹² Roman Catholicism is the second largest institutionalized religion in Vietnam.

2.2.1 The Tension between Vietnamese Buddhists and Catholics

Differences of rites and social values between Catholicism and the native religions of Vietnam were one of the main reasons why the Vietnamese feudal court prohibited Catholicism.¹³ Because of its focus on the worship of a single Creator, Catholicism met with a number of challenges in its process of bringing the "message of gospel" to the Vietnamese. The practice of ancestor veneration of the Vietnamese was the biggest challenge to the missionaries.¹⁴ As mentioned above, Catholicism broke the dominant position of Confucianism, and it disordered people's thinking through prohibiting Vietnamese converts to worship ancestors. This was shocking to the Vietnamese as a whole, as ancestor worship was a highly regarded traditional practice rooted in people's spiritual lives.

The Catholic teaching on monogyny is also a reason why the Vietnam feudal court disliked Catholicism. Vietnamese Lords would like their subjects to have many wives so that they have many loyal subjects, whereas Catholic missionaries taught their new followers to have only one wife. This made Trinh and Nguyen Lords very angry.¹⁵ Hence, under the Nguyen Dynasty (1802-1945), Catholicism was proscribed in Vietnam. Many Catholics

⁴The Socialist Republic of Vietnam, *Religion and Policies Regarding Religion in Vietnam*, Ha Noi: Government Committee for Religious Affairs of Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2006, p.79.

⁵Phạm Huy Thông, "Ảnh hưởng qua lại giữa Văn Hóa Công Giáo và Văn Hóa Việt Nam (Interrelation between Catholic and Vietnamese Culture)", *Religious Studies Review*, No.2, 2000, p.56

⁶Peter C. Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2005, p.15.

⁷Nguyễn Ngọc Quỳnh, "Policy towards Catholicism under Tự Đức Reign - Social Context and Paradoxes", *Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 3/2010, p. 31.

⁸Pelzer Kristin, "On Defining "Vietnamese Religion": Reflections on Bruce Matthews' Article". *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, No. 12, 1992, p. 79.

⁹ See more in Nguyen Hong Duong, A Study of Organizations of Catholic Parishes and Sub-parishes in Northern Vietnam from the 17th to the 20th century, *Religious Studies Review*, Vol. 1, No.2, May 2007, pp.51-63.

¹⁰Nguyễn Phú Lợi, "Tổ Chức Xứ Đạo Trong Giáo Hội Công Giáo (Organizing Parish in Catholic Church)". *Religious Studies Review*, No.1, 2009, p.30

¹¹Nguyễn Cao Thanh, *An Outline of Buddhism in Vietnam*, Ha Noi: Religious Publishing House, 2008, p.118-9.

¹²The Socialist Republic of Vietnam, *op. cit.*, p.80.

¹³See more in Nguyen Quang Hung, The Nguyen's Dynasty Catholic

¹⁴Nguyễn Hồng Dương, "Nhà Nước Ta với Công Giáo (the Government toward Catholicism)", *Religious Studies Review*, No.7- 2010, p. 25).

¹⁵Nguyen Quang Hung, 2010, *op.cit.*, p.42

were persecuted for undermining traditional Vietnamese norms.

In the process of propagating Catholicism in Vietnam, missionaries tended to separate Catholics from non-Catholics because they were afraid that their religion would be affected and tainted by religious activities of non-Catholics. In the eyes of the French missionaries, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and other indigenous beliefs which had been deeply rooted in the Vietnamese culture for thousands of years, were considered 'đạo rôi' (complicated religion),¹⁶ and non-Catholics were regarded as 'ngoại đạo' (pagans).¹⁷ They prohibited their priests and followers from many things, such as attending traditional religious ceremonies, funerals of the pagans and feasts in honor of the death anniversary of the pagans, watching 'hát chèo', a kind of Vietnamese classical traditional operas and dramas, and even going to school with the "pagans".

Accordingly, in the early days of spreading Catholicism, missionaries creatively adopted to the traditional village institution of Northern Vietnam in the way of governing parish churches and parishioner communities. The Vietnamese Catholics used to seek living zones where they could live in accordance with their own faith in separation from non-Catholic areas.¹⁸ They therefore set up distinctive 'xóm đạo' (Catholic village),¹⁹ where they led a self-contained life. All secular and religious daily activities were strictly organized and covered all aspects of their life.²⁰ When the Catholics died, they were also buried in a separate cemetery which is called 'vườn Thánh' (churchyard) or 'đất Thánh' (holy ground) according to Catholic funeral services. The process of setting up private Catholic villages and enforcing various prohibitions made Catholic adherents isolated from the rest of the Vietnamese society.²¹

Tensions between Buddhists and Catholics were particularly high during the reign of the influential Catholic Ngo Dinh Diem, the president of the Republic of South Vietnam. In 1954, the North became a communist state under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, while the South remained a non-communist state under King Bao Dai in 1955 and then Ngo Dinh Diem. With the increasing support of the United States, both militarily and financially, in 1956,

Diem proclaimed himself to be the president of the Republic of Vietnam. From the very beginning of Diem's rule, his administration was inclined to support Catholicism. Diem's government gave preferential treatment to Catholics over Buddhists in many areas: religious affairs, public services, distribution of government aid, and even in military promotions. In some areas, Catholic priests had their own private armies whose principal mission is to protect churches and priests. The Catholic Church was the largest landowner in the country²². Many Catholic churches were built in Buddhist holy places, for example, the government ordered a Catholic priest to build a church for the Virgin Mary on the holy Thiên Bút mountain where there is a Buddhist temple and an ancestral burial ground for Buddhist followers. In order to develop a Catholic system of higher education, the government provided funds for the establishment of two new Catholic universities in South Vietnam. Vast supplies of United States food relief were distributed through Catholic relief services and through Catholic priests in the provinces.

Contrary to what Diem had done for Catholicism, Buddhism did not get such good treatment from his administration. It placed all kinds of restrictions and obstructions on Buddhist monks, followers, and temples. Buddhists were required to obtain the Diem's official permission to conduct public activities. Buddhist literature and prayer books were strictly censored. They did not grant the permission to construct new Buddhist temples, schools or charitable institutions. Buddhist schools had neither encouragement nor funds for their educational activities. Even young Buddhist monks were also drafted into the army without exception.²³ Buddhists in the army were often not equipped with weapons to defend their own villages if they refused to convert to Catholicism. In order to have better living conditions or to avoid being forcibly resettled by Diem's regime, some Buddhist villages converted to Catholicism.²⁴

Matters finally came to a boiling point on May 6th, 1963, on the occasion of the Archbishop's silver anniversary. Vatican flags were raised beside the national flags, while just three days later, on the Buddha's birthday, the Buddhist flags were banned in Hue (central province of Vietnam). This prohibition led to the struggle of the Buddhists against such discrimination. At the broadcasting radio of Hue, the Buddhists held a peaceful procession to ask for revoking the prohibition. But government forces and police used tear-gas bombs and weapons to suppress the crowd. Nine people were shot dead or ran over by

¹⁶Nguyễn Hồng Dương, 2010, *op.cit*, p. 25.

¹⁷ Nguyễn Hồng Dương, "Bước Đường Hội Nhập Văn Hóa Dân Tộc của Công Giáo Việt Nam (The Beginning of the National Cultural Integration of Vietnamese Catholicism)", *Religious Studies Review*, No.1-1999, p.54

¹⁸McLeod, Mark W. and Nguyen Thi Dieu, *Culture and Customs of Vietnam*, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001, p. 57

¹⁹Nguyen Hong Duong, May 2007, *op.cit*, p.58.

²⁰ See Nguyễn Hồng Dương, *Nếp Sống Đạo của Người Công Giáo Việt Nam (Religious Way of Life of Vietnamese Catholics)*. Viện Khoa Học Xã Hội, Viện Nghiên Cứu Tôn Giáo. Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Từ Điển Bách Khoa, 2010, p.11)

²¹See more in Nguyễn Hồng Dương, 1999, *op.cit*, pp.54-5

²²Nagendra Kr. Singh (ed), *op.cit*, pp.78-9.

²³*Ibid*.

²⁴Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, Praeger Publishers, 1967, p.993

tanks; there were also many injuries, and thousands of arrests.²⁵

During the next weeks, there were several protests by Buddhists in other cities, especially in Saigon (the former name of Ho Chi Minh City) and the Central coast. Not only Buddhists but also non-religious people and even some Catholics, including notable intellectuals, students, and employees who were sympathetic to the difficulties facing Buddhists, expressed their discontentment through various demonstrations. These groups were also broken up by violent means by the police and soldiers. In the face of such circumstances, Buddhist leaders and organizations appealed to President Diem for desisting from terrible measures of discrimination and suppression that had continued relentlessly against Buddhists. Notably, a 48 hour hunger strike was staged by 400 monks at the XaLoi temple, and another by over 200 nuns at An Quang temple as part of the struggle for the granting of the five demands.²⁶ Due to the indifference of Diem's government concerning Buddhist aspiration, an increasing number of Buddhists took to streets throughout the country from Hue to the South.

On the 11th of June, 1963, Most Venerable Thich Quang Duc (1897-1963), a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, committed the act of self-immolation at a busy intersection in Saigon to protest the persecution of Buddhists by South Vietnam's Roman Catholic government.²⁷ The spirit of struggle among the Buddhists became stronger with each passing day. Several days after that, many monks, nuns, and lay Buddhists throughout the country followed suit in their objections to Diem's policies. Most Buddhist monks, nuns and lay people viewed this series of events of 1963 as 'Pháp Nạn' (the Buddhist crisis). Following this incident there developed much animosity between Buddhists and Catholics both in the North and the South. This remained until after the unification of Vietnam in 1976, affecting Buddhist-Catholic relationships throughout the country, especially in marriage.

2.2.2 The Catholic Adaptations to Vietnamese Society and Culture

In the process of evangelization, Catholicism has demonstrated some flexibility in adapting to some aspects of traditional Vietnamese culture in contemporary times. This is especially the case after the second Vatican Council (1962-1965), when direct measures to solve 'the problem of rituals' in inter-religious relations were developed by the Church in Vietnam. This created good conditions for the

cultural integration of Catholicism in Vietnam. Most notably, priests encouraged their adherents to retain some traditional customs and manners, thus leading Vietnamese Catholics to gradually incorporate many traditional rituals with their religious rites. One of the most notable adaptations of the Vietnamese Catholic Church is to permit their followers to worship ancestors. On April 12th, 1974, the Vietnamese bishops officially issued a communication that specified some permissible activities, attitudes, and rituals concerning the practice of ancestor veneration. It allowed the Catholics to set up an ancestral altar at home, burn incense, light candles, and give offerings to ancestors. At funerals of their family members, they were permitted to set up an altar on which the image of the deceased, an incense-burner, fruit, and flowers were placed. It was even permissible for the Catholics to perform prostrations with joined hands and to hold burning incense sticks before the corpse in accordance with traditional Vietnamese customs. Similar ceremonies to commemorate the deceased were also held yearly. In marriage rites, the bride and groom were now permitted to perform the 'ceremony of veneration toward the family ancestors'²⁸. This also changed the practice among Vietnamese Catholics in the North plain, who also started to practice some traditional ceremonies such as the ceremony of praying for long peace and good harvest, New Rice ceremony, Double five festival (the 5th day of the 5th Lunar month), and Farm-work initiation ceremony, which had previously been banned.²⁹

Vietnamization of Catholic life is also found in many other aspects. On Palm Sunday, a Christian feast that falls on the last Sunday before Easter, commemorating the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem in the days before his passion, Christian followers in the world normally use olive or palm branches for the service welcoming this event. As the festival was introduced to Vietnam, olive or palm branches are replaced by coconut leaves, a specific tree indigenous to Southern Vietnam. On the traditional Vietnamese New Year 'Tết', the Vietnamese usually set up a New Year's tree 'cây nêu'³⁰ in front of their house. Catholics also now follow this custom except that they stick the holy cross on this tree to welcome the New Year and pray for peace of the country, family, and ancestors in the first three

²⁸ See more in Văn phòng Tổng Thư Ký Hội Đồng Giám Mục Việt Nam, *Giáo Hội Công Giáo Việt Nam* (Vietnamese Catholic Church), Annual publication 2004, Religious Publishing House, p.490.

²⁹ See more in Nguyen Hong Duong, "Consequence of the Process of the Contact between Catholics and Native beliefs of Residents who are Living in the North Vietnamese Plain". *Religious Studies Review*, Vol. 3, No.3&4, 2009, pp. 24-37.

³⁰ According to traditional Vietnamese customs, on the New Year "Tết", in some countryside areas, people usually set up a New Year's tree "Cây nêu" in the courtyard of every home in hopes of preventing evil spirits whose harm could affect their family within the year.

³⁰ See more in Phạm Huy Thông, *op.cit*, pp.59-60.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ For the contents of these demands, see Nagendra Kr. Singh (ed), *Ibid*, p.73

²⁷ Nagendra Kr. Singh (ed), *International Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Vol. 74, (Vietnam: p.1-85), New Delhi: Anmol Publications Pvt. Ltd., 1999, p. 73

days of 'Tết'. Names of Western missionaries and Saints are also Vietnamized by simple phonetic transliterations. For example, Alexander de Rhodes(1612-1660), is Vietnamized as 'A Lichson Đắc Lộ' a French Jesuit missionary who made a significant contribution to Vietnam by creating the new Vietnamese alphabet; Pigneau de Behaine (1741-1799), as 'Bá Đa Lộc' (1835-1892), a French Catholic priest who assisted Nguyễn Ánh (later King Gia Long) to establish the Nguyễn dynasty in Vietnam; Puginieras 'Bảo Lộc Phước' a Catholic bishop and missionary in Northern Vietnam who became the Vicar Apostolic of Western Tonkin (now Ha Noi) since 1868 until his death in 1892, and so on.

In addition to these adaptations, Catholicism has adopted some characteristics of traditional Vietnamese culture. For example, 'Kiệu' (palanquin) and 'cờ ngũ hành' (Five Element flag), the traditional Vietnamese festival flag, which are closely connected to activities of the village festivals, are quite familiar to Vietnamese across the whole country, particularly in rural areas. These two objects are now popularly used to usher in gods in traditional folk festivals. In addition to adopting these characteristics, in Masses or important Catholic festivals such as Christmas, Easter, Palm Sunday, or on the specific anniversary of each Catholic village, Catholics also use the traditional palanquin of non-Catholic people to receive Communion. The architecture of some Catholic churches is adapted from the curved roof of the gate of the communal house and of the traditional Vietnamese village.³¹ According to folklore, the Vietnamese believe that 'namthấtnữ cửu' (man has seven vital spirits and woman has nine). So men are always attached to the number seven, and women are attached to the number nine, e.g., in the practice of cartomancy, the fortune-teller usually asks the person in question to lift up cards seven times for a male person, and nine times for a female one. This belief can be also found in the way of ringing 'the sad bell' in churches. Whenever a Catholic has just died, the church will ring the bell to announce the sad news to the adherents within their parish. This is known as 'the sad bell' or 'the death bell'. Particularly, in many parishes in Northern and Central Vietnam, the bell is often rung seven times and three long-lasting rings if the deceased is male; nine times and three long-lasting rings if the deceased is female.³²

When remarking on the spiritual and cultural life of Vietnamese people, it is also necessary to talk of the practice of 'thờ Mẫu' (worshiping Mother Goddess), an important part of the people's spiritual life in the past and

present, particularly in Northern and Central Vietnam.³³ Almost all Vietnamese goddesses are recognized as the Mother Goddess by the Vietnamese.³⁴ The Mother Goddess is a holy mother and close to the people. Whenever people are happy and joyful they come to Her; whenever people feel sad they talk and share with Her; and whenever people face difficulties, they look for Her support and protection. Catholicism has promptly fallen in the line with this Vietnamese native belief. The practice of Mother Goddess worship has been adapted to the worship of Holy Mother Mary.³⁵ Reflecting the deep belief held among Vietnamese Catholics in the Blessed Mary, the image of Mary is featured on the Vietnamese national costume "Áo dài, khăn đống" (long dress and circular headgear). Accordingly, those adaptations partly make Catholicism closer to traditional Vietnamese culture.

2.2.3 The Relatively Peaceful Nature of Buddhist-Catholic Relations Today

As stated in the report of the Association of Religion Data Archives, the relationship between religious groups in Vietnam as of 2008 was relatively amicable.³⁶ Particularly, there has been significant improvement in the relations between Buddhists and Catholics since the unification of the nation in 1976. Conflicts between Buddhists and Catholics in the past have tended to be generated by the agendas of heads of political regimes who favoured one religion over another, rather than by ordinary followers of these traditions. Since the unification of Vietnam, religious conflicts or clashes among people of different religious groups have rarely happened. Buddhism and Catholicism have generally peacefully co-existed together all across the country and have adapted to each other in terms of religious traditions. Unlike in the past, when the Catholic community in Vietnam was somewhat separated from non-Catholic Vietnamese in the country, they are now more integrated into Vietnamese society. This is for example clear from the fact that Catholic holidays and festivals such as Christmas Day, Valentine's Day, Easter, and Lent are now well known and celebrated widely in Vietnam. Although Catholic villages such as those in Binh An, Doc Mo Gia Kiem, Ho Nai, Tan Mai, and in many other areas still exist, the Catholics' attitude toward religious division has greatly changed and their relations

³³ Nguyễn Hữu Thọ, "On establishment and development of the worship of Mother Goddess in the Northern delta in Vietnam: Seen from political Angle" *Religious Studies Review*, Vol.6, No.01, 2012, p.43.

³⁴ Đặng Thế Đại, "The Worship of Mẫu Liễu- Seen from a Culturalogical Angle", *Religious Studies Review*, Vol.6, No.01, 2012, p.31.

³⁵ Nguyễn Nghi, "Cộng Đồng Công giáo và Nhu Cầu Biến Đổi Thích Nghi (Catholic Community and the Needs of Change and Adaptation)", *Religious Studies Review*, No.3, 2001, pp.30-32.

³⁶ Jennifer Linh Le, *The Religiosity of Vietnamese Americans*, M.A Thesis, University of St. Thomas. 2011, p.11.

³¹ See more in Phạm Huy Thông, *op.cit*, pp.59-60

³² Nguyễn Tất Đạt, "Tang Thức Người Việt t Theo Công Giáo, Phật Giáo và Theo Phong Tục, Tín Ngưỡng truyền Thống ở Vùng Đồng Bằng Bắc Bộ (Funeral Rites of the Vietnamese Catholics, Buddhists, and Adherents of Traditional Beliefs in the Northern Delta)", *Religious Studies Review*, No.11, 2008, p.45.

with Buddhists have significantly improved. Instead of viewing Buddhism as a complicated religion or that of “pagans”, Vietnamese bishops, in the Common Letter of 2003, for the first time used the term ‘*tônggiáo bạn*’ (friend religions), to refer to other religions in general and Buddhism in particular.³⁷ Some Buddhist families are now able to live within Catholic villages. Likewise, Catholics are also able to become close neighbors of Buddhists. It is also mentioned in the Pastoral Letter of 2003 that ‘each Catholic family should become friends with a non-Catholic family within their residential area. The friendship is specifically enhanced through prayer, visits, exchanges and material sharing’. Thus, the discrimination based on religious differences from both sides is not as severe as in the past, and both Buddhists and Catholics today do not pay much attention to whether someone is Buddhist or Catholic, unless they are involved in marriage.

Many inter-religious efforts have been deployed to develop good relationships and cooperation between Buddhists and Catholics. Thanks to visits³⁸ and inter-faith dialogue³⁹ among dignitaries of the two faiths, such fraternal relations have improved significantly. One of the most effective initiatives in this area has been social work. This has been an important opportunity for Vietnamese Buddhists and Catholics, overcoming religious differences, and working together to enhance the well-being of the fellow human beings. Their close co-operation has enabled them to understand each other better. Specifically, in Ho Chi Minh City, Buddhists and Catholics are closely working together to help street children, orphans, AIDS patients and victims of natural disasters.⁴⁰ Catholic and Buddhist doctors collaborate in producing medicinal herbs and participate in charitable health care programs for the poor. Furthermore, Buddhist monks and Catholic priests also have exchanged spiritual ideas and experiences which have helped young followers of both religions to deepen the friendship.⁴¹

³⁷Phạm Huy Thông, *Đạo Công Giáo Tiến Trình Hội Nhập Văn Hóa Dân Tộc ở Việt Nam trước và sau Cộng Đồng Vaticanô 2* (Catholicism : the Process of National Cultural Integration in Vietnam before and after Vaticanô 2)

³⁸See more in J.B. Vu, *Vesak in Saigon: Buddhists and Catholics together for Peace and Friendship*.

<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Vesak-in-Saigon-Buddhists-and-Catholics-together-for-peace-and-friendship-28038.html>

³⁹See more in the conversation between Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh and Reverend Phạm Ngọc Khuê at the diocese of Phat Diem on April 30th, 2007.

<http://thuvienhoasen.org/a5159/cuoc-trao-doi-y-kien-giua-thien-su-thich-nhat-hanh-va-duc-cha-pham-ngoc-khue>

⁴⁰J.B. Vu, “Social Work, an Opportunity for Friendship between Vietnamese Catholics and Buddhist”.

<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Social-work,-an-opportunity-for-friendship-between-Vietnamese-Catholics-and-Buddhists-18532.html>

⁴¹Report on International Religious Freedom in 2010, by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, the U.S Diplomat announced on 17/11/2010.

Communal connection is also found among ordinary members of the two traditions. Buddhists and Catholics invite each other to join important occasions such as weddings, birthdays, death anniversaries, and housewarming celebrations. On Christmas Day, it is now not uncommon for Catholics to send season’s greetings to their Buddhist friends. To respond to such friendly gestures, Buddhists also send back a word of thanks or sometimes a small gift. The same is true on the occasion of the Buddha’s Birthday on the 15th of April of the lunar calendar, when Buddhists may invite their Catholic friends to visit a temple and to have a vegetarian meal with them. Moreover, the presence of a Buddhist temple within a Catholic village, and vice versa, is now possible and is not uncommon. Buddhists sometimes help Catholics from the same village to build their church. Catholics, on their part, help Buddhist followers to build or repair a temple or a communal house. This clearly demonstrates that the relationship between Buddhists and Catholics has become much more friendly and harmonious.⁴²

2.2.4 Contemporary Situation of Buddhist-Catholic Marriage

Although marriage among people of different religious faiths was very rare in the previous Vietnamese society, it has become a common phenomenon in contemporary Vietnam and is on the increase. Particularly, Buddhist-Catholic marriages are quite common amongst the Vietnamese as they are the two most common religions in Vietnam.

There are no statistics of marriages between Buddhist and non-Buddhists in Vietnam, but statistics are available for marriages between Catholics and non-Catholics in general. According to the records kept by the Vietnam Catholic Church, the number of marriages between Catholics and non-Catholics has increased particularly after the Second Vatican Council, when it officially allowed its adherents to marry non-Catholics. Although there are many people who marry without converting, new converts for marriage are also large in number. Within 80 years since the case of King Bao Dai, the number of marriages between Catholics and non-Catholics in Vietnam has reached almost 67,780 in 2007⁴³. According to the statistics announced by the Church in 2006, the number of converts to marry Catholics is 31,576, accounting for 1/5 of new converts in the whole country.⁴⁴ The number of new converts to marry Catholics in 2007 is 67,780. For the period of 2000-2008, the

⁴²See more in Nguyễn Hồng Dương, “Diversity of Religion in Vietnam”, *Religious Studies Review*, Vol.5, No.2, 2011

⁴³Phạm Huy Thông, *Sự Giao Thoại Giữa Đức Tin và Văn Hóa Dân Tộc* (Catholic Lifestyle: the Interference between Faith and national Culture), <http://vietcatholic.com/News/Html/83171.htm>.

⁴⁴Phạm Huy Thông, *op.cit.*

<http://btgcp.gov.vn/Plus.aspx/vi/News/38/0/240/0/2279/>

average number of converts per year is about 35,000 people, among those, 80-90% converted to Catholicism in order to marry a Catholic.⁴⁵ This statistic does not say specifically how many of them are from Buddhist-Catholic marriages. However, it can be surmised that given the drastic increase in marriages between Catholics and non-Catholics, and the sheer size of Buddhist population in the country, those between Buddhists and Catholics has also increased considerably.

3 HISTORICAL EXAMPLES OF BUDDHIST-CATHOLIC MARRIAGE IN VIETNAM

Inter-faith marriages were very rare in the early history of Buddhist-Catholic relations in Vietnam. In the traditional society, influenced by the feudal system, hierarchy within the family was extremely important. This meant that marriage was conceived of as an alliance between two families, rather than two individuals, and was typically arranged by parents and elderly members of the family. In order for the marriage to build a suitable alliance, the social standing (*môn đấng họ đỗi*) of the families had to be the same. The similarity of religious and social backgrounds between the bride and bridegroom's families was the primary consideration of the marriage.⁴⁶ It was unacceptable to give their children in marriage to a person of another faith. This was because marrying a person outside of their own faith, for them, was tantamount to losing the family tradition. The perceived incompatibility of marriage between Buddhists and Catholics in the past is a particularly significant factor in the former generations' lack of sympathy towards interfaith marriage, resulting in the rare occurrence of Buddhist-Catholic marriages before contemporary times.

The first recorded case of a Buddhist-Catholic marriage in Vietnam took place only 80 years ago, in 1934. It is virtually the only example of a recorded Buddhist-Catholic marriage before the contemporary period. The marriage was between a Vietnamese Buddhist emperor Bao Dai and a Roman Catholic woman. Born Nguyen Phuc Vinh Thuy, Bao Dai (*Keeper of Greatness*) was the thirteenth emperor of the Nguyen dynasty, and the last emperor of the feudal system of Vietnam. Throughout the history of imperial dynasties of Vietnam, this is an extremely rare case in which a Vietnamese king married a person of a different religion. This is particularly notable as he was born and grew up in Hue, the region traditionally known as 'the cradle of Buddhism' or 'the capital of Buddhism' in Vietnam because it is home that gave birth to, grew and promoted traditional

Vietnamese Buddhism. The previous emperors of the feudal court of Hue always attached much importance to traditional ritual values of Buddhism and Confucianism and had less sympathy for Catholicism. This unusual case of inter-faith marriage caused many people to suspect French intervention; their marriage 'smelled high of French chicanery'.⁴⁷ It was indeed arranged by the French colonial administration, on the basis of their political and religious agenda. While Bao Dai was studying in France, the couple Charles and his wife, former French embassy officials in central region, Bao Dai's adoptive parents, intended to select a young Vietnamese girl who was Western well-educated, rich, and most importantly, a devoted Catholic. Nguyen ThiHuu Lan (1914-1963), who was born in a wealthy Catholic family in Gò Công, a Mekong Delta town, studied in France from the age of 12 and became a naturalized French citizen, was chosen. The aim of the French colonial administration was to train Bao Dai to be a king of Western style; his wife must be a learned devoted Catholic. When his children were born, they would follow Catholicism, and then the crown prince would succeed as the next king. This prospect pleased the French governors, because they had always wished that Vietnam would have a Catholic king.⁴⁸ Furthermore, they thought that such a marriage would help Bao Dai to change the political view of mandarins in the Court towards France and the Catholic Church.⁴⁹ Bao Dai came to love the woman chosen by his adoptive parents and stuck with his decision.

From the very beginning, their relationship encountered a number of strong oppositions. Since Nguyen ThiHuu Lan was a Catholic and had a French nationality, most members in the royal family opposed him marrying her. Queen mother TuCung and Ton That Han therefore refused to let Bao Dai find a wife for himself. They tried to force him to marry Bach Yen, who had been selected by the Court, but he did not accept this. Finally the Court let him to take a wife of his own choice.

Bao Dai also made a number of concessions to his wife's family, in order to make his marriage work. This involved a number of changes to the traditional treatment of kings' wives. Only one day after their wedding celebration, Nguyen ThiHuu Lan was inaugurated as queen entitled Nam Phuong (*Southern Scent*) because it was one of her family's requests. This was an extremely bold step since according to the law of the Nguyen dynasty, wives of kings

⁴⁷Wedding and Thanks', *The New York Times*, 2 April, 1934.

⁴⁸ Lý Nhân Phan Thứ Lang, *Những Câu Chuyện về Cuộc Đời Nam Phương Hoàng Hậu Cuối Cùng Triều Nguyễn* (*Stories of the Queen Nam Phuong's Life, the Last Queen of Nguyen Dynasty*). Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà xuất bản Văn Nghệ, 2006.

⁴⁹David Lan Pham, "Political Marriages in the Vietnam History" <http://www.caidinh.com/Archiefpagina/Cultuurmaatschappij/politicalmarriages.htm>

⁴⁵Lm. Antôn Nguyễn Ngọc Sơn, *Nhìn Lại Sứ Mạng Truyền Giáo trong 50 Năm và Hướng đến Tương Lai* (Looking back the Mission within 50 years and forward to the future),

⁴⁶Pham Van Bich, *The Vietnamese Family in Changing: The Case Study of the Red River Delta*. Great Brain: Curzon Press, 1999, p.105.

were only conferred the title 'imperial concubine'. They would be only recognized as queen after their death. He also issued a special edict that allowed the queen to be dressed in yellow, the traditional royal color. This broke the royal family's regulations; yellow, the traditional royal color, was reserved only for kings. Moreover, despite being the king of a nation, Bao Dai was exacted wedding-presents from his future wife's family. In order to marry Nguyen ThiHuu Lan, he had to accept hard conditions requested by her family, as follows:

- Marie-Thérèse Nguyen ThiHuu Lan should be inaugurated as official queen as soon as their wedding celebration.
- Their marriage needs to be exceptionally permitted by the Vatican.
- After getting married to Bao Dai, she has the right to retain her own faith as a Catholic.
- Their children must be baptized in the Catholic Church, and profess their mother's faith. However, Bao Dai is allowed to keep his own faith as a Buddhist.

He accepted all the above conditions without any hesitation. Although there was controversy about religion of the ruler's fiancée, their wedding celebration took place according to Buddhist tradition on March 20th, 1934 in Hue. At the time of their wedding, Bao Dai was 21 years old, and Nguyen ThiHuu Lan was 19. The couple later had five children. As agreed, all the children were baptized in their mother's faith and became Catholics.

Bao Dai's example is highly relevant to the present study, because it shows a typical set of difficulties that accompany marriages between people of different religious faiths on political, cultural, and religious levels in Vietnam. His case is also extremely important in that it paved the way for the practice of inter-faith marriage among the Vietnamese. Following their marriage, the Roman Catholic Church made considerable changes to its attitudes toward inter-faith marriage, and started issuing dispensations (permission for interfaith marriage) in Vietnam.

4 ANALYSIS OF FACTORS IN THE RISE OF BUDDHIST-CATHOLIC MARRIAGES IN VIETNAM

The rapid transformation of social realities, globalization and increasing secularization in recent decades are usually referred to as reasons to explain the global increase in interfaith marriage.⁵⁰ However, in the Vietnamese context, factors directly or indirectly leading to the rise of Buddhist-Catholic interfaith marriages are much more varied. This section discusses them under four categories: the revival of

religions, the effect of the model of secular government on religion, the impact of immigration waves to the South, and a change of popular attitudes towards traditional family life.

4.1 The Revival of Religions

Once the country is in peace and independent, the people's life is stable, spiritual needs are necessary for individuals and communities. After the unification of the country, most importantly, the government's policies toward religions have become more open and positively changed. The clergies' figure is still primarily involved in religious sphere, but they have widely engaged in society and made themselves closer to the people. These factors are potential reasons for the revival of religion in Vietnam. Since many religions have been revived and developed, the increase of religions, religious beliefs, and followers in number is a matter of course. It is an inevitable consequence of the revival of religions. The increasing number of religions and followers reflects such a religious revival.

The religious revival in Vietnam is one of the main reasons that have contributed to the increase in interfaith marriages. There has been a revival of religion in Vietnam since the unification of the nation and the establishment of the Socialist Republic in 1976. The 2001 statistics reports that there were only six recognized religions with around 15 million followers.⁵¹ But the number of religious believers increased suddenly after that, with 20 million followers in 2003.⁵² As of 2011, the government officially recognizes thirteen religions and thirty-three religious organizations.⁵³ This recognition does not include hundreds of folk religious beliefs present in Vietnam. The following section discusses four potential reasons for such religious revival: the change in the government's policies toward religion, an increase in the spiritual needs of individuals and communities, the renewal of religions, and the change of the religious ascetic lifestyle of the clergy.

4.1.1 The Change in Government's Policies toward Religion

In the early days of independence, the government's policies about religion were restrictive of religious activities. This was mainly because the communist leaders considered religious beliefs and practices to be

⁵¹ Đỗ Quang Hưng. *Tái Cấu Hình Đời Sống Tôn Giáo ở Hiện Nay: Những Thách Thức Về Mặt Pháp Lý (Re-constructing the Religious Life in Vietnam at Present: Challenges to the Legal Status)*. Ban Tôn Giáo Chính Phủ, 2011. <http://btgcp.gov.vn/Plus.aspx/vi/News/38/0/240/0/2112/Tai-cau-hinh-doi-song-ton-giao-o-Viet-Nam-hien-nay-Nhung-thach>.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.* (See the appendix: *Religions in Vietnam at present* in Trương Hải Cường, *op.cit.*, pp.150-9)

⁵⁰ Fr. Vimal Tirimanna (ed), "A Few Theological and Pastoral Perspectives of Interfaith Marriages". *FABC Papers*, No. 127 (Feb. 2009), p.7.

impediments to modernization.⁵⁴ They viewed religion as unscientific, often labeling them as consisting of superstitious practices.⁵⁵ This limited religious activities of both Buddhists and Catholics. As for Buddhism, the state permitted only a certain number of men and women to enter into the professional religious life, to attend Buddhist training centers, or to receive full ordination.⁵⁶ What was behind this policy was the idea that religious activities in temples were only suitable and necessary for the old, and not for the young. Hence, young devoted Buddhists were not permitted to be ordained as monks, and other lay Buddhists were not encouraged going to temple, either. The number of both ordained and lay Buddhists decreased considerably as a result of the reduced participation of young people in religious life, and Buddhism lost its vitality, particularly in the north. Regarding Catholicism, it is its identification with the previous South Vietnam government, coupled with the Church's anticommunist stance that made Catholics a natural target for the new regime's hostility. The communist leaders also regarded Catholicism as representing a subversive foreign influence. Hence, in 1975, the government started a campaign of discrimination and harassment against Catholics. As they did to Buddhists, they restricted Catholic practice considerably. Catholic priests were forbidden to teach outside their parishes. The number of newly-ordained priests was limited, and church construction or repair was forbidden.

In integrating international conventions and the popular rights to freedom of religions in its domestic law, the state has showed a more open attitude and introduced considerable changes towards religion. They have made special efforts to improve the level of "freedom of religion" within the country by employing a much more open attitude toward religious activities.

By the so-called "doimoi" (innovation) policy, religion has gradually made a comeback, causing a great concern for the Communist Party. So the government promptly promulgated reformed policies toward religious activities. As regulated by the constitution that "religious places for worshipping are protected by law. No one can violate the religious freedom, or misuse the religious freedom to break

the law and the government's policies".⁵⁷ In the theory, the Vietnam Communist Party promulgated a three-point policy regarding religion, consisting of: "(1) respecting both the right to freedom of religion and the right to atheism, (2) educating and motivating both the masses and religious groups to implement political tasks set forth by the party, (3) helping free churches from imperialist shackles, and returning them to the people"⁵⁸.

The most significance change made in the reformed policies is that of the attitude of the Communist Party Central Committee of Vietnam towards religious followers. Previously, Vietnam Communist authorities regarded religious beliefs and practices as impediments to modernization; they looked at religious followers as enemies⁵⁹. But, in this new resolution, they considered religious followers in terms of public relations, which has many similar points to the building of a new society⁶⁰. Particularly, in the reformed resolution, the Party affirmed that "faith, beliefs, and religion are spiritual need of a part of the population"⁶¹ The *Resolution No. 24* passed by the state in June 1991 affirmed that "it is necessary to overcome narrow-minded attitude, prejudice, and discrimination towards religious people, to oppose any violation to religious freedom".⁶² More specifically, the *resolution No. 25* dated 12 March, 2003 regarding religious practices affirmed "any religious followers shall have the right to practice their religion at their own home and worship places as stipulated by the law; any authorized religious organizations shall be legally practiced and protected by jurisdiction to practice, open religious schools to educate dignitaries, publish religious books and maintain, build new religious places as stipulated by the law"⁶³.

In recent years, the Vietnamese government has made every effort to show positive changes in their reformed policies toward religions. This has brought in an increased level of religious freedom, leading to a strong revival of religions, where the practice of various religious traditions has been restored.

4.1.2 Increase in the Spiritual Needs of Individuals and Communities

⁵⁷ Hiến pháp nước Cộng hòa Xã hội Chủ nghĩa Việt Nam 1992 (the constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1992), Hà Nội, p.36.

⁵⁸ Cited in Nguyen Van Canh, *Vietnam under Communism 1975-1982*, (Measures Against Religion: Pp. 164-188), Stanford University, Hoover Institute Press, 1983, p. 165.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p.181.

⁶⁰ Đỗ Thị Kim Định, "From Reform in Directions to Reform in Religious Policies in Vietnam from 1990 up to Present", *Religious Studies Review*, No. 4, Vol. 2, December 2008, p.4.

⁶¹ *Ibid*.

⁶² *Ibid*, p.5.

⁶³ The Communist Party of Vietnam, *Documentation of the 7th Congress conference of the 9th Party Central Committee*, The National Politics Publishing House, Hanoi, 2003

⁵⁴ To communist leaders, religion was regarded the "opium of the people", products of the so-called superstition (*mê tín dị đoan*), a stumbling block to Marxist doctrine, and incompatible with the Marxism (Nguyen Van Canh, *Vietnam under Communism 1975-1982*, Stanford University, Hoover Institute Press, 1983, p.186).

⁵⁵ Nguyễn Đức Lữ, *Sơ Lược về Quá Trình Hình Thành, Phát Triển của Tôn Giáo Học ở Việt Nam Hiện Nay* (Overview of the process of formation, Development of Religious Studies in Vietnam today), in Nguyễn Hồng Dương, *op.cit.*, 2010, p.70).

⁵⁶ Bruce Matthews, *op.cit.*, p.66.

Since the unification of the country in 1976, the spiritual demands have become strong and diversified. The Vietnamese had not only fought foreign aggressions such as Chinese, French and American but had also coped with the difficulties of civil war for a rather long time. While facing a number of fierce struggles, the focal task of people was nothing other than gathering up their entire mind and strength in order to confront the aggressors and defend the country. In such circumstances, people might be not quite interested in religious affairs. Thus, the spiritual life at that time seemed to not be a necessity. However, shortly after South Vietnam was liberated and the country was completely independent, life returned to normal, and people began to be interested in daily basic needs. Religious need, a proper need of a part of the masses, was also a concern. The position of each religion in people's lives was determined by the mass of people themselves. They had the right of freedom to put their faith in a religion appropriate to their spiritual needs. The people's religious lives therefore became animated from the family to society. This has propitiated religions to be revived and developed.

4.1.3 The renewal of religions

The revival of religion in Vietnam has not been just the recovery of religions of previous centuries, but also their renewal. Old forms have been broken and new ones have been developed, making Buddhism and Catholicism more appropriate to present social contexts.⁶⁴ Adaptations have been made in such foreign traditions as Buddhism and Catholicism to 'folk religious beliefs' of the country. One of the most notable adaptations has been the above-mentioned incorporation of the traditional practice of ancestor worship into the religious life of Catholics. The practice of ancestor worship has become an important element in Buddhist-Catholic relations, because both Vietnamese Buddhists and Catholics attach much importance to worshipping their ancestors. This has narrowed the gap between these two religious groups considerably.

4.1.4 The Change of Religious Ascetic Lifestyle of the Clergy

In recent decades, the revival of religion has also involved social engagement; religion has played a significant role in such areas as moral education, health care service through Oriental medicine, and charity work. This has changed the lifestyle of the clergy, who had previously lived ascetic lives rather cut off from society. Their activities, those of religious and secular natures alike, are now familiar to the ordinary people. Religious

institutions such as Buddhist temples and Catholic churches are no longer considered as places only reserved for old people. They have come to attract the young who wish to learn moral values. The range of activities undertaken has also expanded, no longer confined to performing rituals or preaching, but also covering cultural and artistic activities such as games, performances, and entertainment. These developments have made religion more accessible to people, helping them improve both material and spiritual life. The motto '*Sống tốt đời đẹp đạo*' (living for good life and nice religion) expresses their commitment to integrate with society.

As mentioned above, more freedom of religion has been granted and religious diversity is more widely embraced with the increase in the numbers of followers in the various religious traditions. Encounters of people with different religious backgrounds have thus become common. It is not uncommon for them to fall in love, enter into marriage and establish families, and inter-religious marriage is more likely to take place. With the increase in the spiritual needs of individuals and communities, people tend to officially identify themselves to a specific religion. The renewal of religions, particularly Buddhism and Catholicism, and the change in the religious ascetic lifestyle of the clergy are important factors in the growing numbers of Vietnamese coming to these two religions. Hence, marriages between Buddhists and Catholics are more common, leading to the rise of Buddhist-Catholic marriages in Vietnam today.

4.2 The Effect of the Model of a Secular Government on Religion

The model of a secular Vietnamese government on religion in general and on inter-faith marriage in particular is also one of the factors for the increase in the cases of marriage of people of different religions in Vietnam. In the history of the country from ancient times to the modern age, the government did not separate their political system from religion, but it more or less used the theories of a certain religion to run the nation. Nevertheless, after the unification 1976, under the leadership of the Communist party, Vietnam chose the model of a secular state, giving priority to religious diversity.⁶⁵ The secular government does not set up its political policies on the basis of religion, breaking the monopoly of a certain religion within the country. In particular, the state plays an objective role in regulating and administering religious affairs. In terms of Marxist ideology, the secular government of Vietnam supports no religion and is atheist. The general principle of party members in the mechanism of government is no

⁶⁴ Trương Hải Cường, *Một Số Vấn Đề Tín Ngưỡng Tôn Giáo ở Việt Nam Hiện Nay* (Some Issues of Religious Belief in Today's Vietnam). Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Chính Trị Quốc Gia, 2012, pp.133-40.

⁶⁵ Đỗ Quang Hưng, *op.cit.*

religion but they respect religious freedom.⁶⁶ This was clearly mentioned in the constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1992 that “every citizen has the right of freedom of religious belief, to believe or not believe in a religious belief. All religions are equal before the law”⁶⁷.

Do Quang Hung asserts that the Vietnamese government pursues “the model of religious pluralism”, It creates the ability for Vietnamese people from urban to rural areas, from coastal plains to the highlands, to select a religion corresponding to their spiritual needs. Particularly, the secular government does not interfere in issues relating to inter-faith marriage of people of different religions. They therefore remain neutral about inter-faith marriage. Everyone has the right of religious freedom to marry a person of another religion according to their choice. It is because a valid marriage according to the government law is that the couples register their marriage by going to the local authorities without religious ones. Thus, the effect of the model of a secular government also made a contribution to the increase of the number of inter-faith marriages in Vietnam.

4.3 The Migration Waves to the South

Known as the new economic area with various specific natural characteristics, South Vietnam (the Mekong River Delta) is considered better-off than the North. There has been a large immigration to this region for various reasons and in different historical periods. This has increased the number of inter-religious marriages in contemporary Vietnam and in the South in particular.

After the conflicts between the Tây Sơn uprising and the beginning of the Nguyễn dynasties (Nguyễn Anh) since 1787 to 1802 and after the Nguyễn emperors' interdiction policies and the fierce persecution of Catholics in first half of the 19th century, Catholic followers sought shelter in the South, where they were able to live, work and practice their own faith safely. The Catholic priests and followers set up their first parishes in the south.⁶⁸

In the mid-20th century, the Northern Delta was severely affected by over-population, natural disasters, crop failures, and a long famine of 1954-1955, whereas the South was

favoured by nature in every aspect.⁶⁹ In the face of such problems, people had no choice but to leave their homes for the South. Many families had to leave their father's natal villages and ancestors' lands for other people's land and other people's natal villages. According to the statistics of the Agency in charge of migration of Diem's government, there were approximately 928,152 people, including 706,020 peasants, 88,850 fishermen, and 133,276 civil servants, students, and merchants.⁷⁰ Among those, Catholics were nearly 2/3 of the migrants, which accounted for 40% of the Northern Catholic population.⁷¹

After the Dien Bien Phu victory on May 7th, 1954, while the majority of Vietnamese people were joyful, some Catholics were still living in anxiety. Resulting from conflicts between the revolutionary government and the anti-communist forces in Vietnam after the Geneva Agreement in 1954, pressures from both inside and outside the Church, and the Viet Minh's prejudice against Catholicism, thousands of Northern Catholics hurriedly sold their houses and gardens, leaving the native land for the South.⁷² Within just a year, hundreds of thousands of North Vietnamese Catholics evacuated to South Vietnam. This event has since been called the “Passage to Freedom” exodus of 1954-1955 of Vietnamese Catholics.⁷³ It created an emigration wave of Northern Catholics to the South. There are different statistics of Catholic emigrants during this period.⁷⁴ However, the total of 543,500 Northern Catholic followers and 809 priests of 10 dioceses fled to the South, according to Rev. Trần Tam Tinh's statistics, is quite reliable.⁷⁵ Due to the immigrations of 1954-1956, by the 1960s, there were about 1,500,000 Catholics residing in the South. There are now 5,000,000 Southern Catholics.⁷⁶

⁶⁹ Nguyễn Quang Hung, “Vài nét về Cuộc Di Cư của Giáo Dân Bắc Kỳ sau Hiệp Định Genève năm 1954 (Some Features of the Migration of Northern Christians after Geneva Agreement in 1954)”, *Religious Studies Review*, No.6-2004, p.26.

⁷⁰ Lindholm Richard W. (ed.). *Vietnam: The first five years*. An international symposium. Michigan 1959, p. 49.

⁷¹ Nguyễn Quang Hung, “Vài nét về Cuộc Di Cư của Giáo Dân Bắc Kỳ sau Hiệp Định Genève năm 1954 (Some Features of the Migration of Northern Christians after Geneva Agreement in 1954)”, *Religious Studies Review*, No.6-2004, p.23.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.29.

⁷³ Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia*, USA: Duke University Press, 2004, p.13.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.30 (Bishop Phạm Ngọc Chi gave a number of 860,206 emigrants which includes 676,348 Catholics, 182,817 Buddhists, and 1,041 Protestants, See in *Mission Catholiques*, No.47, 1995, p.240)

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.23. (To him, due to political motives or getting more support from international aid agencies, some organizations perjured the number of migrants. In addition, Barrett showed a number of 560,500 Catholic emigrants which is not much different from Rev. Trần Tam Tinh's statistic (See in *World Christian Encyclopedia. A comparative study of Churches and religions in the modern World AD 1900-2000*, New York, 1982, p.158).

⁷⁶ McLeod, Mark W. and Nguyen Thi Dieu, *op. cit.*, p.59.

⁶⁶ See J. J. Rouseau's perspective on the secular government in Đặng Nghiêm Vạn. *Suy Nghĩ về Mối Quan Hệ giữa Nhà Nước với các Tổ Chức Tôn Giáo ở Việt Nam (Reflection on the Relationship between the Government and Religious Organizations in Vietnam)*, Journal of Religious Studies, Series No. 5/2002, p.17.

⁶⁷ The constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1992, Hà Nội, p.36.

⁶⁸ See more in Đặng Mạnh Trung, “Vài nét về Sự Hình Thành các Xứ, Họ Đạo Đầu Tiên ở Miền Đông Nam Bộ” (Some Features on the Formation of first Catholic Parishes and Sub-parishes in the Southeast), *Religious Studies Review*, No. 11, 2009, pp.49-54.

From the end of the 20th century, in the process of the industrialization and urbanization of the country, many people immigrated to major cities, particularly Ho Chi Minh City, Dong Nai province and some other provinces of the South, for economic and educational opportunities. The migrants were mainly young people who had arrived for employment or studies. According to the general Department of demographics, since 1994 to 1995, the number of migrants over 5 years old in the whole country was more than 12 million (14.9% of the population). Ho Chi Minh City has around 2.2 million migrants. On an average, yearly there was about 1.1 million.⁷⁷

Thus, the South has attracted many immigrants from different regions coming to live and work. The South inhabitants have also consisted of various groups of people representing different cultural and religious backgrounds. This has made South Vietnam highly multi-religious.⁷⁸ Among the numerous religious traditions including folk religious beliefs, Buddhism and Catholicism have been the two best-represented religions in the region. It is this diverse religious environment that has made inter-religious, especially Buddhist-Catholic, marriages increasingly common. Typically, Ho Chi Minh City and Dong Nai province are two of the most densely populated places with Buddhist and Catholic followers living together for hundreds of years. The adherents of the two faiths establish good mutual relationships when they are very young, because they live as neighbors and mix together in schools, in workplaces, and in entertainment venues. Such common activities may lead to romantic relationships, resulting Buddhist-Catholic marriages. This has led the number of Buddhist-Catholic marriages in the South to increase promptly.

4.4 Change of Popular Attitudes towards Traditional Family Life

A final factor in the increase in inter-religious marriages in contemporary Vietnam is the change in the structure of the Vietnamese family. The younger generations now have more open-minded attitudes toward love-based marriage, increasingly rejecting arranged marriages, and have come to pay less attention to differences of religions.

4.4.1 Change in the Traditional Vietnamese Family

The traditional Vietnamese family has changed significantly since after 1975 due to impacts of various social and economic conditions. There is a change in the family life; traditional agricultural communities with bigger families have been replaced by smaller, often nuclear, families, where children tend to have more independence.

The young prefer to have personal independence rather than to completely depend on parents or senior members of the family. Thus, in present Vietnamese families, parents and elders in the family do not play a decisive role in their children's marital partner selection as they used to, but they play the role as persons who provide advice and suggestions for their children's marriage. Not only do children today have freedom to find a spouse for themselves, but they also decide everything related to their new family.⁷⁹ For instance, the preparation for the wedding, including the finances, which was previously dealt with by parents, is nowadays considered the children's responsibility. Younger generations are also less likely to inherit traditional values as some leave home often before they come of age to earn their own living in urban areas. This allows parents little time to educate their children.

As stated above, the prevalence of nuclear families partly makes young people today inclined toward an independent life. Many young people leave their home to earn a living early in their lives, leaving rural areas for industrial urban centers. Thus, while they are exposed to diverse cultures and religions, life away from home can make young people become disconnected from their family traditions such as customs, manners, kinship, and spiritual activities. Thus, the change in the structure of Vietnamese family is an inevitable process due to the effects of industrialization, urbanization, and globalization. Among these, urbanization has had a greater impact on the family and on interfaith marriages.⁸⁰ Changes in the traditional Vietnamese family life has led to the increase of inter-religious marriages.

4.4.2 Open-minded Attitudes of Today's Young toward Love-Based Marriage

Most marriages among young people today are usually based on free choice and romantic love, as opposed to an arrangement made by their family.⁸¹ Compared with their parents' generation, they have more opportunities to meet people, sufficient material life, and better education. Thanks to these conditions, their outlook on life, including issues of love and marriage, has become more open than that of the previous generations. Previously, most traditional marriages were arranged, and even in the case where two people met and fell in love, they had to take a long time before they expressed their sentiments to each other. During this period, they communicated through letters and were also allowed to have 'dates'. When they were aware of each other's feelings, they also needed someone to introduce or match them to the other.

⁷⁹Ibid., p.77.

⁸⁰L. E. Shahanam, *Belonging But Not Believing: Interfaith Marriage*, Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian knowledge, 2009, p.12.

⁸¹Ibid., p.125.

⁷⁷Cited Lm. Luy Nguyễn Anh Tuấn, *Thường Huấn Linh Mục G.P Phát Diệm* (Document for training Priests at the Phat Diem archdiocese), 2012, p.5.

⁷⁸Đỗ Quang Hưng, *op.cit.*

Moreover, their marriage had to be accepted by their parents. Nowadays many young people do not tend to go through such lengthy processes of getting to know each other and forming a romantic relationship. They can find out his/her prospective partner's background fairly quickly. The two people may have only known each other only for a few months before they make a decision to live together. A wedding celebration may take place shortly after that.

Once young people are in love with someone, they stress the importance of love rather than other factors. 'Love in marriage is important, love must come from oneself.'⁸² In the former society, particularly in arranged marriages, parents did not choose a specific bride or groom but they chose the family of the bride or groom.⁸³ But today's young generation is much more interested in romantic love. So they tend to select a partner with whom they are really in love. For them, it is not religious faith or their partner's background family, but true love that is a necessary and sufficient factor to determine the joys of married life. In response to the matter of interfaith relationships, young people usually give a simple answer: "each person professes one's own faith". By such an understanding, they are open minded enough to opt for love without religious hindrances. To separate them for the reason of different religions would be impossible. The marriage among people of different religions, therefore, has become more common in the present generation than in the parents' one.

4.4.3 Decrease in the Young's Interest in Religious Issues

As mentioned above, Vietnamese youth today are less concerned with religious issues, particularly differences of religions, which used to be of paramount importance in the traditional family/community life. Most young Vietnamese believe that all religions are good and teach people to do good things and avoid evil. Hence they do not pay much attention to religious differences. According to a survey carried out in early 2010, with more than two thousand young people from both rural and urban areas, religious belief is one of the matters that attracted the least attention from them, among issues such as moral values, cultural traditions of the country, family traditions, politics, and social affairs. 9.9% of the interviewees said they did not care at all about religion, 17.9% essentially did not care, and 32.3 % more or less

cared; a combined ratio of these groups was 60.1%.⁸⁴ Since the young are less concerned with religious differences, they do not hesitate to make friends with someone of different religious faiths or to become a couple. Thus, they are less likely to care about religious differences in their relationships but they tend to seek an ideal partner with true love. This can be considered to have contributed significantly to the increase in interfaith marriages in the contemporary period.

5 CONCLUSION

This research the religious landscape of Vietnam, with particular reference to the two largest religious communities in the country: Buddhists and Catholics. It has provided a historical overview of Buddhist-Catholic relations, highlighting that those communities came to live isolated from each other, because of tensions between Buddhists and Catholic under Ngo Dinh Diem's regime. While this may be the reason for the rarity of Buddhist-Catholic marriage in the past, the researcher pointed out that the marriage between Bao Dai and Nguyen Huu Lan, the first recorded Buddhist-Catholic marriage, marked a significant turning-point of the Church toward interfaith marriage. The religious revival in Vietnam since the unification of the nation in 1976 is one of the main reasons for the increase in inter-faith marriages. During the mid and late 20th century, massive migration to the South of Vietnam has made the South highly multi-religious. It is this diverse religious environment that has made inter-religious marriages, especially the Buddhist-Catholic mix, increasingly common. Another factor in the increase of inter-religious marriages in contemporary Vietnam is the changes in the structure of the Vietnamese family. Younger generations have more opened-mind attitudes toward love-based marriages, increasingly rejecting arranged marriages, and have come to pay less attention to the differences between religions.

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