
RELIGION, CULTURE AND VIETNAM SEEN FROM A CULTURAL-RELIGIOUS POINT OF VIEW

**Quang Hung Nguyen^{1*}, Michal Valčo², Julia A. Krokhnina³,
Elena N. Ryabova⁴ and Tatyana V. Cherkasova⁵**

¹ *Vietnam National University and Center for Contemporary Religious Studies (CECRS), College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Faculty of Philosophy, 336 Nguyen Trai street, Thanh Xuan district, Hanoi, Vietnam*

² *University of Presov in Presov, Greek Catholic Theological Faculty, Ulica biskupa Gojdica 2, 080 01, Presov, Slovak Republic*

³ *Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, Department of Administrative and Financial Law, 36 Stremyannyi Pereulok, 115093, Moscow, Russia*

⁴ *Federal Centre for Educational Legislation, Scientific Research Department, 3 Ordzhonikidze Street, 115998, Moscow, Russia*

⁵ *Mordovian State University named after N.P. Ogarev, Department of Social Work, 68 Bolshevistskaya Street, 430005, Saransk, Russia*

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Abstract

Vietnam's long history is marked by cultural revivals as well as political struggles and intense efforts at national emancipation. The thousand-year-long distinct civilizational history has been analysed by many scholars in the past; in a more recent, post-colonial time, from Dao Duy Anh to Tran Quoc Vuong, from Tran Van Giau to Tran Ngoc Them, intellectuals influenced by Marxism have been looking for a Vietnamese cultural characteristic with a clear foundation in the socio-economical context of Vietnam, the Vietnamese village culture or Vietnamese rice agriculture. These views are examined against the background of the intellectual legacy of Max Weber, Christopher Dawson and Paul Tillich who see religion as the core of culture in its widest meaning, as a life-form of human existence (Dasein). By studying relations between great cultures and their main religions, this paper aims to emphasize that it is impossible to find Vietnamese cultural characteristic only in the physical and tangible culture. It is necessary to look for it in the 'Vietnamese spirit', that is, in non-material cultural phenomena, including the Vietnamese traditional religions (Confucianism, Buddhism and native religions) and possibly even in new forms of religious expressions. A careful study conducted with such holistic outlook will lead to the conclusion that Vietnam belongs not only to the East Asian Confucian cultural region but also to the Southeast Asian native civilization.

Keywords: religious, syncretism, native, religions, Christianity

*E-mail: nguyenquanghun50@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Since the colonial period, some Vietnamese authors had expressed their worry about losing Vietnamese identities. Pham Quynh was concern that “If the Story of Kieu [Truyen Kieu] still exists, Vietnamese language still exists. If Vietnamese language still exists, Vietnam nation still exists.” [P. Quynh, *Pham Quynh*, https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ph%E1%BA%A1m_Qu%E1%BB%B3nh] But what constitutes a ‘Vietnamese identity’?

Vietnam is a country with thousands of years of civilization. Until now the nation of Vietnam has been analysed in many historical and socio-political monographs. However, the question ‘what constitutes a Vietnamese identity?’ has not been sufficiently discussed from a cultural viewpoint? This study will present partial answers to this question building on a concerted effort by international scholars to identify the place of religion in a given cultural and socio-political context. The Marxist views will be compared and complemented with ideas from selected internationally renowned scholars.

Based on the viewpoints of Max Weber (1864-1920), Christopher Dawson (1889-1970) and Paul Tillich (1886-1965) who see religion as the core of culture in its widest meaning - as a life form of human existence (Dasein). By studying relations between great cultures and their main religions, this paper aims to emphasize that it is impossible to find Vietnamese cultural characteristic only in physical and tangible culture. Rather, it is necessary to look for it in ‘Vietnamese spirit’, that is, in Vietnamese traditional religions (Confucianism, Buddhism and native religions) and new forms of spirituality. Such analysis will bring us to the conclusion that Vietnam belongs not only to the East Asian Confucian cultural region but also to the Southeast Asian native civilization. This paper, then, is an effort to clarify what Vietnamese is from a cultural-religious point of view.

2. The place of religion in culture - M. Weber, C. Dawson, P. Tillich

Culture has been defined in many different ways, sometimes even with contrary meanings. At first glance, culture can be seen as having no substantial relationship with religion, for example when we talk about a scientific or an economic culture. When analysed from a more complex perspective, however, culture and religion are mutually related, even intertwined. The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity proposes that “culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs” [1]. According to this definition, religion is considered an integral aspect of culture or a cultural form. From the widest meaning, culture is the life form or social life form of human existence (Dasein) as a whole. Culture is all that belongs to human existence which is distinguishable from nature. It is manifested in all intentional human actions aimed at changing themselves and/or their natural environment. Each human community within a given geographical space and

during a given time period exhibits specific ways of changing their natural environment and expressing their unique thoughts, imaginations, feelings, etc. in both the material and immaterial cultures. In this regard we usually talk about a Chinese culture, an Arabian culture, a Western culture, an Indian culture, a Russian culture, etc. [2]. In this paper, we understand culture in this wider meaning, which includes religion as an important element.

Religion is also a phenomenon that is not easily definable due to its subjective qualities and diverse forms. Existing definitions usually emphasize the relation between human subject and deity, a relation between the sacred and the profane, the immanent and the transcendent. As Everett rightly argues, "Although it is impossible to give a conclusive definition of religion, there are certain characteristic forms of human activity and belief which are commonly recognized as religious: worship, separation of the sacred from the profane, belief in the soul, belief in gods or God, acceptance of supernatural revelation, and quest for salvation" [3, p. 342]. F. Schleiermacher (1768-1834) defined religion as "a feeling of absolute dependence" - absolute as contrasted to other relative feelings of dependence [4]. Such definitions appear to be more universally applicable to primitive and Asian religions than belief-oriented ones.

C. Dawson classified two characteristic traits of all religions regardless of they are 'primitive' or modern: (1) a general belief in all arts of mystical essences or forces which supposedly influence human attitudes, behaviours, and ways of life; (2) this belief/faith exists throughout intermediary (often supernatural, sacred) persons, things, places, etc. [2, p. 74-75].

Even though Confucianism is essentially a philosophical, ethical and political teaching and Confucius was not a prophet nor did he speculate about what happens after death, Dawson perceives Confucianism in its widest meaning as a religion (Confucian religion). However, Confucianism is a special religion, a secular religion. In this sense, even Marxism could be considered an art of 'religion' [2, p. 75]. Both Confucianism and Marxism provide a comprehensive account of reality, invoke attitudes of trust in carefully defined transcendent norms and laws, and provide structures to cultivate faith among their adherents. Moreover, based on the specific character of most East-Asian non-institutional religions, many Vietnamese (and Chinese) authors have emphasized the differences among religions based only on whether they exist with or without institutional structures and founders [5]. Such differentiation can be useful for the purpose of state administration of religious affairs in Vietnam (and China), as it provides a general map of the religious situation in the country. Under such view, religion and faith have been understood as synonymous terms.

However, sacral (religious) and profane cultural activities belong undoubtedly among two of the oldest categories of human activities which had appeared even in pre-history of mankind. There is no religion or faith, primitive or modern, which does not convey some cultural values through its rituals, customs, behavioural patterns, or systems of belief. Even primitive religions such as animism and shamanism, also convey the cultural values of primitive people. Theoretical and systematic research into the relation between religion and culture

has only been carried out since the beginning of the twentieth century and Max Weber may have been the first scholar to analyse their relationship systematically.

Unlike Hegel and Marx who understand religion as a pure system of codifications, canons or thoughts, Weber analysed religion only in its external forms, in human behaviours, in lifestyle of adherents [6, p. 202]. He saw a close relationship between Christian austerity and prudence on the one side, and the capitalist spirit on another. According to his opinion, one of the constitutive parts of the modern capitalist spirit, as well as the modern culture, is rational lifestyle based on the fundamental principle of Christian austerity [6]. Weber used the term ‘Kulturreligion’ to indicate an existing essence (or essential relation) between religion and culture. He also used the concept ‘Wirtschaftsethik’ of the world religions to explain the role of religion in the social and cultural institutions of a society [6, p. 238]. Moreover, he analysed some world religions, such as Hinduism and Confucianism, and perceived them as the core of Indian and Chinese cultures.

Of course, not every religion can be at the core of a given culture. Weber explained why not Buddhism or Taoism, but Confucianism has been the spiritual foundation of Chinese culture. Religious wars, such as we saw in many Western societies, have not been common in East Asia permeated by Confucianism. This is mostly the case because Confucianism is a secular religion. Confucius was not a prophet and Confucianism avoids speculating about what happens with humans after their biological death. Due to its secular nature, Confucianism could not exist alone but needed Buddhism and Taoism as more mystic forms of religion. It is characteristic of the East Asian cultural region that the relationship between Confucian secular state and religions (Buddhism, Taoism and native religions) is a dynamic one. While we can observe high levels of syncretism, there have also been tensions and collisions. Persecutions of the Buddhist and Taoist adherents sometimes belonged to the religious policy of the secular Confucian state, partly because of the need for copper to mint coins. The Confucian mandarins did not like Buddhist communities using a lot copper for making Buddhist statues [6, p. 285].

Weber also rightly explained why not Buddhism or Samkhya, but Hinduism became the spiritual basis of Indian culture. It was not only because of the fact that Buddhism struggled for equality against self-ism and any caste system; not only due to the fact that Buddhism was heterodox in Indian ancient society; but also because of the strict Buddhist Dharma [6, p. 116-117]. Moreover, Hinduism is not without a caste system. Castes, rituals, and the right of the Brahmans are the main institutions of Hinduism. Without castes, there is no Hinduism [6, p. 31], according to Weber.

Dawson developed Weber’s analysis on the relationship between religion and culture in his work *Religion and Culture* first published in 1948 [2]. “What is the relation between culture and religion? Of course, a similarity in life form already can determine a similarity in vision about life, a similarity in behavioural norms, and a similarity in values norms. As a result, a culture of the spiritual and

unified community is built and based rather on the same common religious beliefs than on whatever physical solid unity.” [2, p. 67]

According to Dawson, therefore, religion is the key to history. We cannot understand the immanent forms and cultural manifestations of a society if we do not understand its religious background. Religion was the mother of ancient great cultures and philosophy [2, p. 69-70]. To Dawson, world culture could be divided into five or six great cultures, namely Chinese, Western, Indian, Arabian, Russian, etc. and they all emerge and develop on specific world religions that serve as their pillars. These cultures immediately fall into a crisis when their constitutive religions become weak. In his other book, *Religion and the rise of Western culture*, Dawson explained how Christian faith had built its own culture in Middle Ages and created a Western culture with a Christian spiritual foundation: “The beginnings of Western culture are to be found in the new spiritual community which arose from the ruins of the Roman Empire owing to the conversion of the Northern barbarians to the Christian faith. The Christian Church inherited the traditions of the Empire (...) The Latin Fathers – Ambrose, Augustine, Leo and Gregory – were in a real sense of the fathers of Western culture.” [7].

Of course, a new religion always appeared in the context of a particular culture. Then in the process of its history, this new religion built its own ‘culture’, which usually took centuries. The Christian culture and the Western Graeco-Roman culture achieved a sufficient level of unity and saw their triumph only in the Middle Ages. “Any study of the origins of medieval culture must inevitably give an important place to the history of Western monasticism, since the monastery was the most typical cultural institution throughout the whole period that extends from decline of classical civilization to the rise of the European universities in the twelfth century - upwards of seven hundred years (...) the relation of religion and culture, for it was through monasticism that religion exercised a direct formative influence on the whole cultural development of these centuries.” [7, p. 44]

Following Dawson, Paul Tillich emphasized a mutually reinforcing relationship between religion and culture, using the concept of ‘substance’ to explain the relation between them. In his book *Religiöse Substanz der Kultur* (The Religious Substance of Culture), he says: “religion is the substance of culture, culture is the form of religion” [8]. In Tillich’s opinion, if we understand religion in its most important meaning, which entails the understanding that religion essentially determines who we are as human subjects, then religion (understood in a broad sense as a meaning-conferring narrative with its own sacred procedures, rituals and artefacts) is the ground of every culture: “Religion is what cultural achievements are on a deeper dimension” [8, p. 94-95]. Thus, Tillich can claim that “religion is the substance of culture, culture is the form of religion” [8]. His focus was on analysing the relationship between Christianity and Western culture. He emphasized that a proper theology of culture could become a bridge between religion and culture and that the Christian church is responsible to develop Christianity with the aim of it becoming the substance of Western culture - the

perfect example of a right relationship between religion and culture in the West [8, p. 32-47].

Christianity is not the occasional nor exceptional case where religion is the core of culture. World religions are basis of great cultures such as Christianity and Western culture, Confucianism and Chinese culture, Hinduism and Indian culture, Islam and Arabian culture, etc. Those great cultures have those religions as their main pillars. In his book *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, Dawson explained how Christian faith, step by step, built its own, robust culture in medieval Europe: “Western culture has been the atmosphere we breathe and the life we live: it is own way of life and the way of life or our ancestors; and therefore we know it not merely by documents and monuments, but from our personal experience (...) The great world religions are, as it were, great rivers of sacred tradition which flow down through the ages and through changing historical landscape which they irrigate and fertilize (...) It is rare indeed to find a culture in which the whole course of this religious development can be traced from beginning to end in full light of history. But the history of Christendom is an outstanding exception to this tendency.” [7, p. 11-13]

However, as Dawson openly admits, Europe has recently downplayed the value of its religious heritage and “the vital subject of the creative interaction of religion and culture in the life of Western society has been left out and almost forgotten” [7, p. 13].

In Asia, there are some national and regional cultures that are rooted in a local religion, such as the Tibetan and Mongolian cultures are based on Tibetan Buddhism, and Thai, Khmer, Myanmar, and Sri Lanca cultures are rooted in Theravada Buddhism. Unlike the Mahayana Buddhism, which exists in syncretism with Confucianism and Taoism in China, Vietnam and Korea, the Theravada and Tibetan Buddhism play a key role in the listed regional cultures. Some less developed or ‘primitive cultures’ can also be based on shamanism and ‘natural’, animistic religions [9].

Samuel Huntington is another renowned Western author who takes the role of religion in society seriously. Building on numerous studies of religious and cultural scholars, as well as his own in-depth-research, Huntington divided the world human culture into eight great regions, determined mostly by the prevailing religions in the given geographical areas. In contrast to the five great cultures based on a prevailing religion - Western, Russian, Chinese, Arabian and Indian - some other great regions, such as Latin America, Africa and Japan, do not seem to have one particular religion as the main pillar of their culture [10]. Nevertheless, the influence of the local religions on the culture in these regions is still significant.

The same relation can be found between the Vietnamese culture and its religions. The question before us, then, is whether Vietnamese religions are just a part of Vietnamese culture or whether they are at its core as essential, constitutive elements.

3. Religion and culture in Vietnam - changing paradigms

A thousand-year long history of Vietnamese struggle against Chinese occupation and domination stands behind the current discourse on the uniqueness of Vietnamese culture. Vietnamese believe that although the Vietnamese culture belongs to the East Asian Confucian world, it remains relatively independent from Chinese culture. Moreover, since the independence in 938 A.D., Vietnamese people had fought repeatedly against invaders from the north during the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. Vietnamese patriotism and nationalism has always been tied to their struggles for national independence. In the present context of globalization, the fear to lose one's national and cultural identity has become more serious and has been discussed frequently among Vietnamese intellectuals.

For most Vietnamese scholars, there is no difference between the socio-political and the cultural viewpoints when it comes to identifying the nation's cultural identity. In reality, however, the issue is not so simple. Pinpointing and competently describing the Vietnamese cultural identity is not easy because the country is not in the centre of any great world civilization and is under influence of not only Chinese but also Indian, South East Asian and even French cultures. The cradle of Vietnamese culture was the Red River Delta. Over the centuries in what became known as the 'long march to the South' (*nam tien*), Vietnam had extended its territory to include other cultural groups. As a result, North Vietnam got under the influence of Chinese culture, especially due to the practice of Confucianism, Taoism and Mahayana Buddhism, but Central Vietnam and Mekong Delta, due to Champa natives and the large Khmer community, became influenced by Indian cultures. The country has thus become culturally exceptionally diverse.

Moreover, Southeast Asian native cultural factors needed to be taken into account and all foreign religions and cultures had to go through a process of selective adaptation when they were introduced into the region. Painful concessions had to be made during this process. For example, after a long time of discussion and prohibition, the Catholic Church had to allow Vietnamese Catholics to carry out their traditional Chinese rituals. This provision came as a result of the Second Vatican Council in 1965. Under the influence of Mother Goddess worship tradition, Vietnamese Catholics tend to have more intense feelings about their attachment to the Virgin than those in other countries. From the architectural perspective, we can find some Christian churches in Vietnam which are built in East Asian architecture style and look similar to pagodas.

Islam was accepted into the region under similar conditions. Muslim communities in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines are generally more open and tolerant than those in Middle East and North Africa. Of course, there have been isolated violent conflicts between Muslims and other communities in Southeast Asia, for example in Mindanao, Sulu Archipelago, Sulawesi or Aceh, but terrorism in Southeast Asia is not too problematic for international peace, compared to other areas of the world.

Due to these indigenous Southeast Asian factors, a gap exists in Vietnamese traditional society. Meanwhile, the upper stratum of the society, the mandarins and literati, followed the Confucian doctrines. The lower classes were under the influence of Buddhism and native religions and faiths. Tensions ensuing from this division contributed to peasant riots against central authorities. Commanding those peasant uprisings were mostly Buddhist or native religious leaders. Such riots were documented during the time of kings Le Thanh Tong (1447-1497) and of Minh Mang (1820-1840), i.e., when the Dai Viet kingdom (former name for Vietnam) was a powerhouse in Southeast Asia.

Despite of these well-documented dynamics between religions and the cultural as well as socio-political life in Vietnam, some intellectuals and scholars who conduct their research from the perspective of Marxist theory see Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and native religions in Vietnam as nothing more than an aspect of the Vietnamese culture. Among those, who write from a secular-cultural perspective, Dao Duy Anh (1904-1988), Tran Van Giau (1911-2010) and Tran Quoc Vuong (1934-2005) emphasized religion as an indispensable part of Vietnamese culture. They argued that nobody can talk about Vietnamese culture without Vietnamese traditional religions and faiths: “Based on the structure of peasantry, agriculture and village of Dai Viet [former Vietnam], traditional Vietnam is a peninsula at the West-East and North-South mutual economic and cultural intersections where religion and faith are seen as an indispensable part of the culture. Vietnamese spirituality is generally open, tolerant, pluralist and diverse. This spirituality covers Confucian rationalism (it is an Eastern agricultural, not an industrial rationalism that we see in the West since the eighteenth century), a Buddhist mindset, a sense of transcendence stemming from Laozi-Zhuangzi, and also traditional religions of the small farmers. This constitutes the so-called Vietnamese ‘traditional legacies’ that had existed before Western ideas were introduced in this country.” [11]

The Vietnamese Marxist authors are not the kind of dogmatic Marxists of Stalinist type. Unlike many of the European Marxists, Vietnamese Marxists are not really atheists in the strict meaning of the word. Although they are strongly influenced by Confucian secularism, they are not without a religious sentiment and beliefs. Vietnamese are usually devoted worshippers, but instead of going to Buddhist temples to pray for Nirvana or a deliverance after death - things which are ignored by Confucian secularism - they pray for their health, happiness, successes in their careers, and all kinds of worldly things. Their devotion is thus oriented on the temporal wellbeing, not some transcendent, otherworldly benefits. In their daily behavioural patterns and rituals, they follow Confucian piety, but their spiritual beliefs tend to be polytheistic.

Nevertheless, the said Vietnamese Marxist scholars attempted to prove that it is possible to look for Vietnamese cultural identity outside of Vietnamese religions on the socio-economic basis. They claimed that the ‘Vietnamese identity’ rests in agricultural lifestyle. According to Tran Quoc Vuong [11], Vietnamese culture is a village and wet rice culture, therefore, there has been no Vietnamese academic culture, but only a folklore mass culture. His point of view

can be characterized as a Red River Delta centrism. Tran Ngoc Them, on the other hand, looks for Vietnamese identities in geo-cultural native characters that can be identified in the material life of Vietnam [12]. Under the rule of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), this view of religion as a part of Vietnamese culture is almost unshakable. Only after the collapse of the communist bloc in the 1990s, the state policy regarding religious affairs has become more open, and the role of religion in Vietnamese society has increased. Nevertheless, the relation between the secular state and religions in Vietnam has not significantly improved.

This narrow, secularist conception, however, is not without weaknesses. It is clear that villages in the Red River Delta are different from those in Mekong Delta in their practice of worshipping and their relative independency. Rural Vietnam and rural China are different not only in some of their socio-economic institutions, but also in their spirituality because of differing native religions. Moreover, it is impossible to explain the differences between Vietnamese and Thai or Khmer cultures even though they all are wet rice agricultures in tropical Southeast Asia. Furthermore, it is well-known that great cultures such as Russian, Chinese, Indian, Arabian, Western, etc. are not formed only on the basis of their socio-economic conditions, but rather on their prevailing spiritual heritage, such as Arabian culture - Islam, Russian culture - Orthodox Christianity, etc. Furthermore, if we limit our definition of Vietnamese identity to that of the village and wet rice agriculture, we will have to admit in the end that the so-called 'Vietnamese culture' will disappear one day when Vietnam becomes an industrial country and the several thousand years long traditional Vietnam will be no longer exist!

Because of the above stated weaknesses of the Marxist conception, we should not look for Vietnamese identity in the socio-economic nor any material basis but rather in the spiritual basis of Vietnamese culture. Vietnam is not an exception from the world great civilizations. Religions play an essential role at the very core of Vietnamese culture and civilization, and when that spiritual pillar becomes weak, it is possible that this Vietnamese traditional culture also falls into crisis. This view has been adopted in different ways by a number of Vietnamese authors.

Phan Boi Chau (1867-1940), Tran Trong Kim (1883-1953) and Phan Ngoc see Vietnamese culture as Confucian in its essence [13]. Similar to China and Korea, Vietnam belongs to the East Asia Confucian world. Despite the fact that Confucianism was weakened after the Opium War in China and as a result of several anti-Confucian movements in later Qing dynasty in China and Nguyen dynasty in Vietnam, Confucianism remains foundational for the Vietnamese culture. "There is really nothing of Vietnamese culture without Confucianism, either in Vietnamese literature, politics, rituals, customs, arts or faiths. There are no Vietnamese, even if some may be against Confucius, who in some ways wouldn't be under the influence of Confucian ideas." [13, p. 201] Kim Dinh (1915-1997), a famous Confucian author and Vietnamese philosopher, argues the same. Without Confucianism, Vietnamese cultural house fell apart so that Vietnamese literati see no meaning anymore [14].

Interestingly, the famous Buddhist monks, Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-) and Le Manh That (1944-), analyse Vietnamese culture from the same cultural approach but see Vietnam as primarily a Buddhist country, much like Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar or Sri Lanka [15]. In fact, Buddhism was the state religion of Vietnam under the Ly and Tran dynasties from eleventh to fifteenth centuries. Although Mahayana Buddhism came to Vietnam from China, it had been indigenized and, as such, played an important role in the struggle for the independence of the Vietnamese state and nation. “Vietnamese Zen Buddhism is an independent Vietnamese Buddhism. ... Buddhism is in any case the backbone of the independent Vietnamese state.” [16]

L. Cadière (1869-1955) could be considered a founder of religious studies in Vietnam. He also uses a cultural-religious approach and sees religion as the core of Vietnamese culture. As an ethnologist, this Vietnamese scholar looked for the Vietnamese identity in Vietnamese native religions and argued that Vietnamese culture is deeply influenced by native religions and worship (*tho than*). He observed that: “In the life of Vietnamese people nothing can really happen without a religious impact. However, religion intercedes into a Vietnamese since he was just born and after that companions together with him until his death and even a Vietnamese after his death is not without his religious responsibility. When we see such supernatural essence originally in Vietnamese souls, so it is undoubted that Vietnamese people are very deeply religious.” [17]

This deep religiousness can best be observed on the character of a typical Vietnamese family. It consists of not only the living members but also their ancestors, their deceased relatives [18]. Therefore, it is religion, in particular ancestor worshipping, that plays a decisive role in family members bonding in Vietnam [18, p. 80-81]. To further confirm this cultural-religious perspective, more analyses of the role of religion in: (1) personal life, (2) family and clan, (3) village and community and (4) on the state/national level need to be conducted [17, p. 75; 18, p. 38].

Some foreign authors see Vietnamese culture as a syncretism of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. This is partly true, but it is also an underestimation of Southeast Asian native factors. In reality, Vietnam belongs to not only to East Asian Confucian world, but also to Southeast Asian environment. To be more accurate, from a cultural point of view, Vietnam should be seen as the *syncretism of Confucianism, Buddhism and native religions*. It is also a special combination of cultural, peripheral and internal components. Of course, ‘native religions’ also include Taoist rituals which came from China, but Taoism is only a part of those native factors. When Taoism was introduced into Vietnam, it had to syncretized with native religions. According to Tran Van Giau, Taoist spirits in Vietnam are not Lao-zi or Zhuang-zi, as those are in Chinese classics, but Tien Dung and Chu Dong Tu [19].

There are also some remarkable paradoxes in Vietnamese traditional spirituality. On one hand, the deities in Vietnamese traditional spirituality are everywhere: Gods dwell in banyan trees, ghosts dwells in red cotton trees (*Than cay da, ma cay gao*) or Lands have land gods, rivers have river ghosts (*dat co tho*

cong, song co ha ba). On the other hand, the Vietnamese people are secular and, in many cases, even atheists in their behavioural patterns. On average, Vietnamese do not spend much time worshipping, unlike the adherents of some other religions in other parts of the world; but their life cannot be without religion, that is, without some form of private spirituality or even ritualistic behaviour.

The last matter to be discussed in our paper is the place and role of Christianity in the Vietnamese society. Christianity was introduced into Vietnam in the sixteenth century and since then it has contributed greatly to the improvement of trade between Vietnam and Europe and stimulated the introduction of Western culture and values into Vietnam, especially during the colonial period. Thanks to the European missionaries, a new national alphabet base on Latin characters (*quoc ngu*) was introduced. Some Vietnamese Christian thinkers, such as Nguyen Truong To (1828-1872), Huynh Tinh Cua (1804-1907), and Truong Vinh Ky (1837-1898), played a crucial role in the reformation movement of Vietnamese intellectuals in the second half of nineteenth century. Today, Christians account for about ten percent of Vietnamese population. In the context of confrontation between Christianity and communism on a global scale, Vietnamese communists introduced policies of discrimination against the Christian religion. Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969), who had lived a long time in Western Europe, tried to counter this trend but even he could not turn the tide and overcome this one-sided view of Christianity [20] in the society. His calls for solidarity between Christians and non-Christians after 1945 were unsuccessful. After 1954, when Vietnam was divided during the American-Vietnam War, one hundred thousand Catholics escaped from North Vietnam into the South because of their fear of communism. After the unification of Vietnam, hundreds of educational and medical institutions built and operated by religious institutions (especially the Catholic Church) were either liquidated or nationalized in South Vietnam [21]. In spite of this painful history, Christianity remains a vital part of the modern Vietnamese culture with a remarkable impact on education, art, and the social cohesion of the Vietnamese society.

The situation improved after the collapse of the communist bloc when Marxism became weaker due to development of market economy, nationalism and a rising religious boom in Vietnam. Religious freedoms were recognized by the CPV for the first time in the resolution no. 24 from 1990 [*Dang cong san Viet Nam (CPV), Nghi quyet 24 cua BCT (Resolution No. 24 of Politburo)*, 1990, http://btgcp.gov.vn/Plus.aspx/vi/News/38/0/240/0/1081/Tu_su_doi_moi_nhan_th_uc_den_su_doi_moi_ve_Chinh_sach_Ton_giao]. Since then, the main religions, such as Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, Tu An Hieu Nghia, as well as more than forty religious organizations have attained legal status. However, the polarization between the secular state and religions is still problematic. These divisions are also projected into the Law of Education, Law of Cultural Heritages, etc. The longer this secular approach remains the more severe consequences it will have for social and cultural development of the country. In addition, the ability of the authorities to mobilize existing cultural-religious resources to build prosperity and peace will remain low.

4. Conclusions

The introduction of Marxism into Vietnam built on the foundation of the existing, secular substrate of Confucianism and the tolerant mind-set cultivated by Mahayana Buddhism. Based on Marxist ideology, Vietnamese authorities had increased the gap between the secular state and religions, and, in consequence, the role of religion in Vietnamese culture and society was undermined and ignored before 1990. Since 1990, following the collapse of the communist bloc, Vietnam has implemented a more open policy regarding religious affairs, but the relation between the secular state and religions is still problematic [22].

Religion has been considered only as a non-essential part of Vietnamese culture, which, we believe, is an underestimation of the role of religion. Vietnamese identity cannot be detached from the beliefs, values, and practices of the Vietnamese faith communities. From a cultural viewpoint, Vietnamese identity is unthinkable without the heritage of Confucianism, Buddhism, and the native traditional religions. Moreover, the contribution of Christianity and other religious influences - either in their original form or as syncretism - should also be acknowledged. Vietnamese cultural space appears to be a special syncretism of Confucianism, Buddhism and native religions, with an added mix of new, Western influences that have been adapted and indigenized. Instead of looking for the Vietnamese identity only through the socio-political magnifying glass, it is better to do it using a cultural point of view. After all, human societies are built around common values and negotiated principles of behaviour that ultimately derive their meaning and urgency from a comprehensive world-outlook, or worldview. To discount this dynamic would be erroneous and potentially dangerous [23-25]. As we have confirmed by our findings, religions have played an important role in shaping human characters as well as group identities of human communities, which, in turn, provided a foundation for cultivating a sense of personal and social responsibility [26, 27]. Hence the urgency to hermeneutically recover the religious sources of human flourishing [28, 29] in our striving to cultivate civic virtues in our societies [30-32].

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