

พหุนิยมทางศาสนาในพื้นที่สูงตอนกลาง ของประเทศเวียดนามในปัจจุบัน Religious Pluralism in The Central Highland of Vietnam Nowadays*

Nguyen Thi Minh Ngoc**

บทคัดย่อ

ประเทศเวียดนามเป็นประเทศที่มีความเชื่อและศาสดำรงอยู่อย่างมากมาย การดำรงอยู่ด้วยกันของความเชื่อและศาสนาที่หลากหลายนี้เป็นไปอย่างเป็นปกติ แต่การพัฒนาอย่างรวดเร็วและมีพลังของศาสนาทั้งหลายในช่วงเวลาไม่นานมานี้ ได้มีอิทธิพลโดยตรงต่อความเชื่อดั้งเดิมของกลุ่มชนเผ่า นั่นคือการค่อยๆ ทำให้ประเพณีดั้งเดิมของชนเผ่าถูกทำลายไป ในบทความนี้จึงมุ่งเน้นไปที่การศึกษาการเปลี่ยนแปลงในศาสนาในเขตพื้นที่สูงตอนกลางจากมุมมองพหุนิยมทางศาสนา และการชี้ให้เห็นถึงความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างศาสนาและความเชื่อของชนเผ่าในจังหวัดต่าง ๆ ในเขตพื้นที่สูงตอนกลางในเวียดนามในปัจจุบัน และประการสุดท้าย บทความจะยกเอาประเด็นเรื่องการรักษาและการพัฒนาความเชื่อแบบดั้งเดิมของชนเผ่าต่าง ๆ ในพื้นที่สูงตอนกลางมานำเสนอ

คำสำคัญ : พหุนิยม, ศาสนา, ความเชื่อ, การเปลี่ยนแปลง, การดำรงอยู่

* This article in the framework of the project “religious pluralism in Vietnam present days – theory and practices” sponsor by The National Foundation for Science and Technology.

** Ph.D. Nguyen Thi Minh Ngoc, Deputy Director of the Institute of Sociology, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Hanoi, Vietnam.

Abstract

Vietnam is a country where many beliefs and religions exist. The simultaneous existence of various beliefs- religions in a community is quite common. The fast and vigorous development of religions in recent time has directly influenced the tribal traditional beliefs, making gradual elimination of tribal traditions. This article focuses on the study of changes in religions in Central Highland from the viewpoint of religious pluralism, and points out the relationship between religions and tribal beliefs in the central highland provinces nowadays. Finally the article raises the issue of preserving and developing tribal traditional beliefs in Central Highland.

Keywords : Pluralism, Religious, Beliefs, Changes, Preservation

Conceptualization of religious pluralism

Religious pluralism came into being in the second half of the 20th century, together with the trend of globalization. This is a basic theory about the harmony between various religions. The overall meaning of pluralism is acknowledgement and acceptance of diversity. This concept has been used in various ways for different issues. The theory of pluralism is said to begin with religion and is related to religion. Diana L. Eck. claimed that cultural and religious diversity is the basic characteristics of every region worldwide. Grounding on such thesis, he developed the concept of “pluralism”. That is not the sheer fact of plurality or diversity alone, but is active engagement with that diversity. One can be an observer of diversity (Diana, 2006). So, real pluralism requires participation and engagement. He also emphasized the characteristics of religious tolerance in pluralism environments. Accordingly, “pluralism is more than the mere tolerance of differences; it requires some knowledge of our differences. There is no

question that tolerance is important, but tolerance by itself may be a deceptive virtue. Sometimes an attitude of tolerance may stand in the way of engagement. Tolerance does not require people to know anything at all about one another” (Diana, 2006). Most importantly, pluralism is not simply relativism, but makes room for real and different religious commitments. He said “Pluralism does not require relinquishing the distinctiveness of one’s own tradition of faith to reach the “lowest common denominator. ” In the public square of a pluralist society, commitments are not left at the door. Rather, pluralism invites people of every faith or of none to be themselves, with all their particularities, and yet to be engaged in creating a civil society, through the critical and self-critical encounter with one another. Pluralism is a process of creating a society by acknowledging, rather than hiding, our deepest differences” (Diana, 2006). So, pluralism relies on communication. The language of diversity is the language of communication and encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism. Pluralism is related to on-table-commitments with an individual’s commitments.

Religious pluralism means that a religion accepts other religions in accordance with the law or freedom of choosing religions. Many religious adherents claim that religious pluralism should encourage cooperation rather than competition and that theological changes are necessary for overcoming differences between various religions, and differences between various sects of the same religion.

The concept of religious pluralism is not new, but only in the modern society has it been raised systematically. Religious pluralism is an universal phenomenon and a common characteristic of religions in the world. Religious pluralism is among the most important issues of religion worldwide in the peculiar conditions of the modern society. The theory of religious pluralism

introduced by the philosopher, theologian John Hick (1922-2012) is highly appreciated. Based on this theory, researchers can study the issue of religious pluralism in particular religions and in particular geographical areas (countries, nations, tribes John Hick himself also continued to implement his own theory with studies of religious pluralism in various aspects. Recently, he delivered a speech on religious pluralism in the Muslim world (John, 2005).

Religious pluralism is getting more vigorous under the influence of globalization. Globalization, especially religious globalization, has influenced religious pluralism on two aspects: firstly, religious pluralism in each country; secondly religious pluralism due to the impact of geographical changes of religion (changes in religious model due to migration). The process of religious pluralism in Vietnam is in the same movements observed all over the world.

The trend of religious pluralism is simultaneous and dialectical with the trend of secularization, modernization, globalization in the modern society. Modernization and globalization create favourable conditions for religious pluralism. The secularization of religions, viewed from the religious perspective, is getting more and more immersed into social life to serve the spiritual need of the individuals and more and more distanced from the orientation to the extremes, which is an important factor that boost religious pluralism.

Religions in the world are in the process of pluralization, with various models. In some countries, pluralism has changed the mainstream religion. In South Korea Puritanism has replaced many other religions and gradually become the national religion. In China, pluralization of religion is also taking place vigorously. In recent years, some new religions came into being and had strong impacts on the political and social life, and they were regarded

as pagan religion (Falun Gong) by the government. Falun Gong still secretly exists and has impacts overseas (especially Vietnam). In the USA, the process of pluralization is taking place speedily and vigorously, contributing to the diversity of the country's religious life. The 1965 immigration law triggered a strong immigration wave to America, together with religious pluralism, especially Asian religions. The religions of the immigrants have really changed the American religious configuration. These new religions are playing more and more important roles in the American religious life. Moreover, under the impact of globalization, the immigrants religions have great impacts on the sending countries, especially the Asian religions, contributing to the American influence on the world's religious life. In the instance of Vietnam, numerous Vietnamese religious sects among the American Vietnamese have influenced the domestic religious life, and affect the relation between religion and politics.

Religious pluralism is an important issue in the contemporary religious life at three dimensions: religious, social and institutional ones.

At the religious level, different religions must accept the simultaneous existence of many others to create a harmony among themselves.

At the social level, pluralism requires a new perception of religion and politics, religion and culture. Religious pluralism in Vietnam nowadays poses great cultural challenges and challenges for the national cultural identity. In the trend of pluralism, the vigorous development of foreign religions, such as that of Protestantism in some ethnic minority areas has threatened the existence of traditional beliefs and the cultural peculiarity that goes hand in hand with them. The gong culture of the ethnic minority people in the Central Highland may be a case in point.

At the institutional level, religious pluralism, whose consequence is the transformation of religious life has posed many new problems

regarding the relation between religion and the government; thus there is a need for changes in religious policies. In the trend of religious pluralism, the government cannot overlook the religions of small groups of people.

The situation of religious pluralism in Central Highland of Vietnam nowadays

Vietnam is a country of many ethnic groups and many religions. Vietnamese religions contain factors of religious pluralism. Religions in Vietnam like Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism and the religions that originated in Vietnam such as Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, Tu An Hieu Nghia, and so on, all find themselves in the process of pluralization. Religions in Central Highland are not exempted from that overall trend. The religions in Central Highland are in the period of vigorous changes. Those changes can be seen in two main aspects: changes over all of the religions, and changes inside each religion itself. In recent years, the big trends of the world's religions including globalization, modernization, and diversification are greatly influencing the religious life of Vietnam, and religious life of the Central Highland is not an exception.

Central Highland is the largest area of basalt soil in Vietnam. It is a plateau of colours and fragrances. Furthest to the north of it is the Atout mountain with the Ngoc Linh peak of 2598 meters above the sea level. Furthest to the south of the area is the Chu Yang Sin which is 2402 meters high. Between the two mountains is a plateau. About 20 ethnic minority groups are living in the Central Highland. Their languages belong to the two language families: Malayo Polynesian (Nam dao) and Mon Khmer. The ethnic groups are: Mo Nong, Koho, Ma, Stre, Stieng, Xo' Dang, Co Tu, De, Trieng, Ro Mam, Ba Na, Brau, Cham, Gia rai, E de.... Among them, the biggest and most powerful ethnic groups are Gia Rai and E-de.

The Central Highland consists of five provinces: Kom Tum, Gia Lai, Dak Lak, Dak Nong, and Lam Dong. Its area is 54 700 km (16.3% of the total area of Vietnam) resided by a population of nearly 5.2 million people. This is one of the six biggest economic areas of Vietnam. In the last 10 years, thanks to the government's investment and local people's efforts, the landscape of the Central Highland has changed greatly with significant achievements in socio-economic development, including the construction of the infrastructure system, especially transportation, irrigation, postal and telecommunication systems.

Throughout the Central Highland, Catholicism, Buddhism, Protestantism, and Cao Dai are the four main religions. Their adherents amount to 1,753,761 people (34.7% of the Central Highland population). There are nearly 3,500 monks/nuns and dignitaries, and about 840 religious edifices of all types. In recent years, the number of religious followers increased rapidly in accordance with the rate of population growth. Remarkably, the number of followers who belong to ethnic minority groups increases sharply, mainly those of Catholicism and Protestantism.

At present time, the number of ethnic minority people who are Protestants are 324,135 people, accounting for 89.3% of the Protestants in the whole area; while the number of ethnic minority people who Catholic are 248,039 people, accounting for 30.0% of the whole areas' Catholic believers. In addition, other religions recognized with smaller numbers of believers include Bahai and Hoa Hao (claiming to be an unique Buddhist sect). New religions which are developing quickly in the Central Highland are Ha Mon, Canh Tan Dac Sung, Ho Chi Minh Spirit, Niem Phat Vang Sanh, Thanh Hai Vo Thuong Su and Falun Gong recognized among the officially recognized religions, Central Highland Protestantism is the one with the most profound pluralism. The Central Highland now has the biggest

number of Protestant denominations sects in Vietnam. According to the Dak Lak General Religion Report 2013 by the Provincial People's Committee of Dak Lak, while there are only 13 Protestant sects in the whole remaining part of the country, there are as many as 47 Protestant sects in the Central Highland, among which many sects are not yet legally recognized.

Religious pluralism is the outstanding common characteristic of all religions in the Central Highland provinces nowadays. In Lam Dong, for instance, according to Le Minh Quang, the picture of Lam Dong' religions is of various colours representing the presence of great religions like Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism with 14 sects, Cao Dai with four sects... Besides, there are many new religious phenomena, and the new Protestant sects that are not yet legally recognized, and not yet filed practice registration forms; the total number of religious followers of the province is nearly 700,000 people (over 60% of the province's population, including 1,254 dignitaries (clergymen) and 450 religious edifices (Quang, 2007).

Religious change is an objective phenomenon that goes hand in hand with social and economical development. In each period, in each area, religions need changes to meet the demand of life reality. However, from the viewpoint of religious pluralism, this article focuses on the changes in the diversity and discusses the religious changes at the macro level of all religions.

In the macro level of religions, the change in Central Highland religious life is caused by the appearance of many religions. The Central Highland is considered a fertile land for religions now. In the past, there were only traditional religious beliefs/practices of the ethnic minority groups, but for the time being, many great religions have set up their presence in the area. Missionary and preaching activities in the Central Highland are among the strategic orientations in the religious development plans of great

religions such as Buddhism, Catholicism and Protestantism. There are many reasons behind the religious pluralism in the Central Highland.

Firstly, some religions have gained remarkable achievements to promote religious development in areas of ethnic minority. The Central Highland is an area of unique characteristics in terms of geographical conditions, language, psychological features, customs and traditions, all of which are based on polytheism.

Monotheistic religions in the beginning could not penetrate the area easily. However, “coming here, the religions have found their own peculiar methods based on the motto of “long rains can finally soak the soil” and have finally succeeded” (Minh, 2011). The most successful examples are Catholicism and Protestantism. Buddhism came here first, but they could not get any success and now return, facing severe competitions from Catholicism and Protestantism. Together with the preaching and missionary activities is the change in the proportion of religious followers. In recent years, the number of Christian, especially Protestant followers has increased continuously. For the time being, Catholicism is the one with the biggest number of followers – 844,192 people (among whom, ethnic minority people account for 329 791 people); next comes Buddhism with 756,288 followers. Protestantism ranks third with 410,578 followers (among whom 378,140 people belong to ethnic minority groups), while Cao Dai has 20 555 followers (Tuan, 2013).

Secondly, another major cause is migration. The Central Highland is the area with high rate of immigration people and with diverse migration types.

Table 1 Statistics of Population, Ethnicity and Religion of Five Central Highland Provinces (Source : website: <http://www.indosun.vn/dat-nuoc-viet-nam/29/tay-nguyen>, date of access 20/9/2013)

Items of comparison	Dak Nong	Dak Lak	Gia Lai	Kon Tum	Lam Dong
Population	510,570	1,771,800	1,322,000	453,200	1,218,700
Number of ethnic groups	31	47	38	42	43
Number of religions	3	13	10	5	12
Number of religion followers	201.300	450.728	312.272	173.593	599.461
Number of Christian	114,324	171,661	114,822	134,312	303,761

The population of Central Highland provinces shows the diversity of ethnicity. Up to now, in Central Highland provinces, the proportion of local ethnic people is small compared to other ethnic groups. Apart from a large number of Kinh people (the majority ethnic group in Viet Nam) migrating here as part of the government's policy to set up new economic zones and due to some other spontaneous reasons, most of other ethnic people from the north have migrated to this area for economic reasons. Good climate and fertile soil of the Central Highland have attracted many ethnic minority groups from the north, where living conditions are harder. The changes in population structure have led to changes in cultures, beliefs and religions. The migrants bring to the area their own culture, beliefs and religions, creating the diversity of culture, beliefs and religion in this land. For example, the H'Mong migrants from the north have brought with them the religion of Protestantism.

At the level of one religion itself, the remarkable change in the Central Highland is the structure of their adherents. Apart from preaching the non-religious people, they tried to proselytize people (from other religions into their own religion). The competition for followers among

religions as well as among sects of the same religion is becoming more and more common. Protestantism and Catholicism are the most dynamic religions in terms of missionary attempts. A number of Protestants and Catholics have converted to Buddhism, but according to Reverend Thich Tri Minh, this much smaller than that of Buddhists converting into Protestantism and Catholicism (Tri, 2012).

Changes in religious beliefs are an important indicator more tolerance with people of other religions. Investigations in Dak Lak and Dak Nong provinces show that followers of one religion do join activities of other religions. An example is the participation of Christians in traditional or Buddhist rituals and vice versa. Similarly, Catholicism in the Central Highland allows their followers to venerate their ancestors at home. Most of the Catholic families have an altar for their ancestors at home, next to the altar for God. Some families celebrate memorizations of their ancestors at church and at home as well, considering them good chances for family gatherings. Returning to/re-adopting the practice of ancestor veneration is a feature that shows clearly the tolerant attitude of Catholicism in Vietnam.

In 2013, Institute of Religious Studies, Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences has conducted surveys of religious reality Highlands. The survey results reflect the picture of religious pluralism of the Central Highlands. The survey was conducted with 1178 followers of three major religions existing at Highland as Buddhist, Catholic and Protestant. The structure of the survey questionnaire in five Highlands provinces as follows:

Table 2 Quantity survey questionnaire distributed in 5 provinces in the Central Highlands

Province	Buddhism		Catholic		Protestant		Total	
	frequency	%	frequency	%	frequency	%	frequency	%
Kon Tum	127	32.1	78	19.5	127	33.2	332	28.2
Gia Lai	49	12.4	88	22.1	40	10.4	177	15.0
Đac Nong	84	21.2	72	18	89	23.2	255	21.6
Đak Lak	60	15.2	82	20.6	52	13.6	184	15.6
Lam Đong	76	19.2	79	19.8	75	19.6	230	19.5
Total	396	100.0	399	100	383	100.0	1178	100.0

Ethnic structure reflects the status of the development of religion in today's Central Highlands. There are distinct differences in Ethnic Composition of various religions. The survey results are as follows:

Table 3 Structure off religious believers

Ethnic	Buddhism		Catholic		Protestant		Total	
	Frequency	%	frequency	%	frequency	%	frequency	%
Kinh	351	88.6	364	91.2	1	0.3	716	60.8
Jrai	22	5.6	25	6.3	51	13.3	98	8.3
Ede					47	12.3	47	4.0
Je					158	41.3	158	13.4
Xodang			1	0.3	2	0.5	3	0.3
Jongao			2	0.5			2	0.2
Muong			1	0.3			1	0.1
Mnong					124	32.4	124	10.5
Tay	14	3.5	1	0.3			15	1.3
Hoa	9	2.3	2	0.5			11	0.9
Nùng			1	0.3			1	0.1
Churu			2	0.5			2	0.2
Total	396	100.0	399	100.0	383	100.0	1178	100.0

For Buddhists, Catholics, believers are mainly Kinh people. In contrast, for the Protestants, the vast majority of believers are ethnic minorities. For Buddhism, the believer are Kinh people accounting for 88.6%. The rest are other ethnicities: Jrai 5.6%; Tay 3.5%, and 2.3% Chinese. Thus, whether Buddhist-oriented development in ethnic minority of Buddhist Temple in Central Highland provinces in recent years has been raised and considered the key of the development of Buddhism in these provinces, however still not obtained satisfactory results. For many different reasons, Buddhism still has not found a way to effectively develop leadership in ethnic minority communities. In our interview, a Buddhist monk said Buddhist presence in the Central Highlands earlier than Protestant but then, Buddhism is not developed. The first reason was at that time, missionaries on ethnic minorities are considered illegal activities. Buddhist monk with special costume should feature in every ethnic region evangelicals vulnerable to local authorities and existing legal prohibition. Meanwhile, the Protestant with casual lifestyle costume easy access to ethnic without being detected. After the year 1990, the State religious policy expanded to create good conditions for the development of all religions. However, this time, Buddhism was no longer focused on the development of ethnic minority religion that focuses on developing the urban areas, where economic development and create favorable conditions for the life of monks and nuns. Until recent years, the issue of regional development Protestant minorities thrive and become really critical issues of society that need to be tackled in many different angles, Buddhism reset new issue directing the development of ethnic minorities. This time it is too late, so the development of Buddhist encountered numerous difficulties in competition with Protestants.

In generally, the believers in Central Highlands are interested in social issues. In 13 social problems are considered most important to

people, happy family that matters most attention with 96%; then is health with 93,9 and the third are religious beliefs with 93,7%. Other issues such as social justice, education, economics, law, democracy, environment, health, jobs ... get different levels of interest.

Table 4 Level of interest in the social issues

Interest	Buddhism		Christian		Protestant		Total	
	frequency	%	frequency	%	frequency	%	frequency	%
happyness	368	92.9	384	96.2	379	99.0	1131	96.0
Social justice	313	79.0	366	91.7	358	93.5	1037	88.0
Good education	261	65.9	338	84.7	331	86.4	930	78.9
religion	352	88.9	383	96.0	369	96.3	1104	93.7
Wealthy	240	60.6	346	86.7	362	94.5	948	80.5
Law	284	71.7	333	83.5	345	90.1	962	81.7
Democracy	258	60.2	320	80.2	326	85.1	904	76.7
Environment	310	78.3	355	89.0	354	92.4	1019	86.5
Health	356	89.9	375	94.0	375	97.9	1106	93.9
Job	233	58.8	384	96.2	349	91.1	909	77.2

Almost all religious believers in Central Highland expressed deep religious faith. They had true awareness about their religion. Specifically, up to 69.9% Buddhists admired by religious Buddhist doctrine. Majority Christians have proper awareness about Catholic doctrine. Nearly all believers have faith in the existence of Heaven (99.0%), hell (98.0%), purgatory(94.5%).

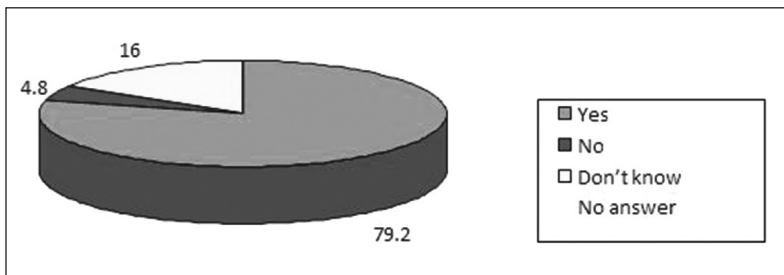
Christians there have always shown themselves as devout believers. Up to 92.2% of respondent regularly attend religious education. This lifestyle has directly powerful impact on children of Catholic families. 92.7% of

children in Catholic families participate fully in religious education classes for their age. Only 3.3% of children have never attended. The Christians regularly go to the church getting high rate, up to 97,7%. The reason to go to church mainly because faith with 96.0%. 86.5% Christians daily pray Bible at home.

Most Protestants become believers by family tradition with 61.9%. However, the number of those becoming believers by friends and relatives also accounted for 24%. This shows that the ratio of new Protestants is high. The main reason is to receive salvation with 86,7%.

The problem of religious pluralism was coined in the context of monotheistic religions namely Christianity does not accept the existence of any religion other than the Christian. The core of religious pluralism is religious tolerance, accepting the existence of a religion other than his religion in a spirit of mutual respect. The trend of religious pluralism is one of the main trends of today's religious world as well as in Vietnam. It is also clearly reflected in the Central Highlands Catholic. Acceptance of other religions rather than Christianity is firstly expressed in the acceptance of salvation outside the Christian Church. Survey results show that majority of Christians believed that other religious believers can receive their salvation.

Table 5 Could non-Christian get salvation?



Survey results showed that 73.2% of Christians agree with marrying one without non-Christian. Most notably, there were 48.4% agree if married to a non-Christian, each person can keep his/her religion. The acceptance and respect for other religions in Catholic families express the nature of religious pluralism. This trend gets higher rate with the young.

Religious pluralism is also reflected immediately in ancestor worship. In the past, Christians absolutely had no ancestor worship. Today, the tradition of ancestor worship had gradually returned to the Christians. The survey results reflect the diverse definition of ancestor worship of Central Highland Christians today.

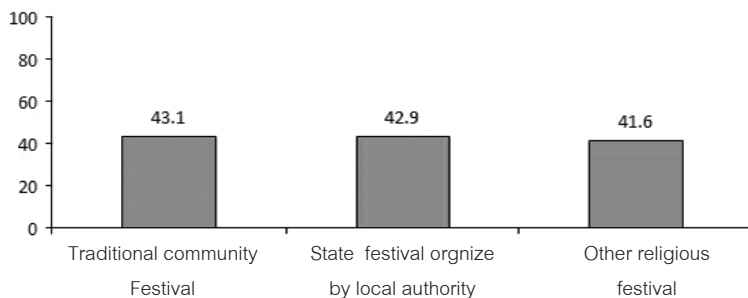
Table 6 Forms of ancestor worship of Christians in Central Highlands

Forms of ancestor worship	Frequency	%
ceremony at church	372	93.2
Feasts at home	170	42.6
ceremony that memorial died day	314	78.7
Make a temporary altar	11	2.8
Make a permanent altar	328	82.2
Make any altar	30	7.5

The table above shows that the majority of Christians in Central Highland now have ancestor worship. Setting up permanent altar is an option of majority and anniversary to celebrate the died day, which is not acceptable in Catholic but upto 78.7% ones performed this ritual.

Religious pluralism reflected in Central Highland Catholic is also reflected in the participation of non-Catholic festival of the Christians, including festivals of other religions. Survey results are as follows:

Table 7 Percentage attending non- Catholic festival



In the tendency of religious pluralism, multi- religious family model also began to appear in the Central Highlands. Religious conflict in the family occurs particularly in ethnic minority that Protestant newly propagated. Surveys show that 12.5% of Protestant Christians encountered opposition of members in the family when becoming Christian. In fact, multi-religious model only really exists in non-Christian family. Buddhists easily accept family members who follow another religion, by contrast, it is difficult for Christians.

Religious pluralism also contributes to the social capital of religious believers. Believers through participation in religious activities and religious festivals have increased opportunities of relationships with others which belong to their religion or atheists. Surveys show that 88.9% Buddhists, 90.0% Christians and 84.9% Protestant Christians said that religious activities that contribute to the expansion of their relationship and 35.8% Buddhists, Christians 46.2% and 46.2% Protestant Christians insist they have relationships believers of other religions. Social capital is essentially based on trust. The survey showed that the biggest benefit that believers receive from social relationships get through religion is mutual trust. 73.1% Buddhists, 63.8% Christians and 66.5% Protestant Christians appreciate mutual trust in the relationship between participation in religious activities.

Relation between religion and tribal traditional beliefs in the Central Highland

Tribal traditional beliefs contain in themselves profound human values. In every phase of social development, tribal traditional beliefs always play the role of a cultural factor that contributes to the cultural values of a nation. Tribal traditional belief is the most important factor that brings about the tribal identity. In the Central Highland provinces today, the rapid and vigorous development of religions, especially Protestantism and Catholicism, is directly affecting tribal traditional beliefs. In the areas of ethnic minority people who are Protestants and Catholics, tribal traditional beliefs are gradually eliminated. In some places, they have quickly disappeared. Many families in the Central Highland have sold their gongs, which are important religious objects of tribal traditional beliefs in the Central Highland; but now sold at the price of VND 12 million for one set of five gongs. This is equal to the disappearance of the traditional Beliefs in spirit. This loss is due to many reasons.

Firstly, for a long period of time, tribal traditional beliefs have been considered superstitious. *Secondly*, the development of the modern society has changed the people's way of life, and some beliefs are no more suitable and fail to meet the spiritual demands of the ethnic minority people. *Thirdly*, the most important factor that leads to the complete elimination of the tribal traditional beliefs in the Central Highland is the development of religions in the area, especially Protestantism and Catholicism. Within a short period of time, the people of the Central Highland have completely abandoned their traditional beliefs, which have been around for thousands of year, when they switch from polytheism to monotheism. This is the basic cause of the existence of areas with completely no traditional beliefs in the Central Highland nowadays.

In recent years, the Communist Party and the Government have paid attention to this and made huge efforts to restore traditional beliefs in the Central Highland. However, there are challenges. In the areas of non-religious ethnic minority people, the traditional beliefs are still in place, though they have been simplified to reduce the financial burden. Some great festivals have been restored with the financial assistance of the government; the festival of buffalo stabbing is one of which.

In the areas of Buddhist ethnic minority people, the traditional beliefs are still maintained, because the religion's policy is to develop in the preservation of traditional beliefs. Reverend Thich Thien Tri, Vice President of the Department of Instructions for Buddhist Followers and President of the Department of National Buddhists has asserted this in his article entitled "Cultural Identity of Central Highland Ethnic Minority People" (Tri, 2012). In his opinion, the Central Highland is a forest area. For this land, the forest is not only a resource, but also a habitat and the people's sacred identity. From the very depth of their heart, the people in the Central Highland consider the forest a sacred living creature that can experience all the human feelings. People in the Central Highland have a forest ethic code. The forest to them is the very source of spiritual and cultural life. Thus, to develop Buddhists among the people in the Central Highland, it is of utmost importance to understand their forest culture. According to him, thinking about the forest merely as a resource and a habitat, one would not be able to understand the very basis of the Central Highland's traditional culture. So attempts to make Buddhism penetrate the area is only achievements on the surface and Buddhism will never be present in the spiritual of the ethnic people in the Central Highland. They will regard Buddha as a stranger, not a divine being (Tri, 2012). Integrating into the local beliefs is one of the characteristics of the Vietnamese Buddhism. An outstanding example of this is the formation of a system of

pagodas/ temples that are dedicated to the four female Gods in the first period of Buddhism's arrival at Vietnam. Nowadays, Buddhism continues its style of integrating into the traditional beliefs and religions of the people in the Central Highland to boost its development.

As of Protestant ethnic minority people, the restoration of traditional beliefs encounters various challenges. The religious beliefs of the people there have changed. The belief in the gods of traditional culture has ceased to exist; replaced by the belief in the God of Christian Bible. The change in the belief in the gods and the supreme being affects the role that the people play in the traditional religious practices. In these areas, to carry out the policy of the Party and the government, the Department of Culture-Sport-and-Tourism has cooperated with many other departments to restore tribal traditional festivals. However, in contrast to the past when the people were the organizers who carried out the rituals so as to emerge themselves in the sacred space of the worshiping practices, they now participate as guests. The sacredness of the rituals no more meets their spiritual demands. For this reason, though the festivals have been restored, they are of superficial nature and fail to function basically as to meet the spiritual demand of the people. The problem is how to improve the people's awareness of the cultural and spiritual values that have evolved for thousands of years in their tribal traditional beliefs. The existence of an altar in their house and the veneration of their ancestors among the Kinh ethnic Christians is an evidence of the return to/re-adopting the traditional beliefs while the people's religious life is still maintained.

Preserving and developing tribal traditional beliefs in the Central Highland will also help prevent the exploitation of religious practices for other purposes that affect the national security. The spiritual needs of the Central Highland's ethnic minority groups are practical ones. If the traditional beliefs can function well and make up sound spiritual basis for their lives,

they will no more look for spiritual props in other religions. Also, investigations have shown that most of the religions penetrate the Central Highland through economic practices such as charity or providing financial support for their business. Therefore, there must be a policy to improve the living standard of the ethnic minority people. Economic stability will serve as the basis for their spiritual stability.

To sum up, pluralism is a religious – social trend that is getting more and more common, which develops simultaneously with other existing trends like secularization and modernization. Religious pluralism is a universal phenomenon, and a character common to all religions in the world. Religious pluralism is among the most important issues of world religions in the modern society.

Together with the vigorous development in socio-economic conditions of the Central Highland religions of the area are in a phase of vigorous transformation and are changing to become more and more diverse. Religious pluralism in the Central Highland is seen clearly through the existence of various religions. The quick and vigorous development of Catholicism and Protestantism is directly affecting tribal traditional beliefs, and gradually eliminating them. Religious changes in the Central Highland are inevitable. Developments in politics, laws, philosophy, religion, etc. all depend on the economic development. However, they all influence one another and affect economic development. Having an insight into the principles of development of the religions themselves, foreseeing trends in which the religions in the Central Highland will change is essential to making policies that lead to sustainable religious development in the Central Highland.

References

- Chu, V. T. (2013). **Religious Changes in the Central Highland Nowadays and Some Problems Raised about the Two Provinces of Kon Tum and Gia Lai.** proceeding of the conference on Religious Changes in the Central Highland, the Reality, Policy and Solution, Library of the Institute of Studies of Religion.
- Dang, N. V. (2005). **Reasoning of Religion and the Reality of Religions in Vietnam.** Hanoi: National Politics Publishing House.
- Diana L. Eck. (2006). **What is pluralism.** Retrieved September 1, 2013, from http://pluralism.org/pages/pluralism/what_is_pluralism
- Ethnic, population, cultural, social characteristics of the Central Highland Economic Zone.** (n.d.). Retrieved November 16, 2013, from <http://www.vietrade.gov.vn/vung-kinh-te-tay-nguyen/2381-dac-diem-dan-toc-dan-cu-van-hoa-va-xa-hoi-vung-kinh-te-tay-nguyen-phan-2.html>
- Finke, R., & Stark, R. (1992). **The Churching of America.** New Brunswick, New York: The University of Rutgers Press.
- _____. (2000). **Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion.** Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press.
- Le, M. Q. (2007). "Some Features of Religious Context in Lam Dong Province". **Studies of Religion**, 10 (52), p. 46.
- Massanari, R. L. (1998). The pluralisms of American "religious pluralism." In **Journal of Church and State.**
- Ngo, V. M. (2011). "About the Method of Preaching and Developing Religious Followers of Religions in the Central Highland. in **Studies of Religions**, 6 (96), p. 49.
- Nguyen, H. D., & Dat, P. V. (2009). **Religious Beliefs and the Folk Society.** Ha Noi: Polytechnique Dictionary Publishing House.

- Nguyen, P. L. (2010). **Changes of Religious Life in Vietnam Under the Influence of Globalization**. Ministry level research, Ho Chi Minh Institute of Politics and Public Administration.
- Stark, R., & Bainbridge, W. S. (1987). **A Theory of Religion**. New York: The University of Rutgers Press.
- Statistics**. (n.d.). Retrieved September 20, 2013, from <http://www.indosun.vn/dat-nuoc-viet-nam/29/tay-nguyen>
- Thich, T. T. (2012). **Cultural Identity of the Ethnic Groups in the Central Highland and Orientation for the Period of Integration**. Proceedings of the conference on Instructing the Buddhists in the Central Highland and Central provinces, Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, Central Department of Instructing Buddhists.