



## New Perspectives of the Communist Party of Vietnam on Religion and Some Issues Raised for Religious Policies in Vietnam Today

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### ABSTRACT

Vietnam is a country with diverse forms of beliefs and religions coexisting and developing. Nowadays, religions have made significant contributions to the construction of national solidarity, actively participating in and effectively contributing to activities in healthcare, education, and charity, and positively contributing to the overall development of the country. However, alongside the positive activities of religions, there are still many instances in society where some individuals exploit beliefs and religions for superstitious and divisive purposes, deceiving the people, and even undermining national solidarity. This article aims to explore the new viewpoint of the Communist Party of Vietnam on religion, evaluate the current situation of implementing religious policies, and propose some recommendations to improve religious policies according to the viewpoint of the 13th National Party Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in Vietnam today.

## INTRODUCTION

Vietnam is a country with various forms of beliefs and religions coexisting and developing. As of 2020, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam has recognized legal status for 16 religions, comprising 43 religious organizations (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2020). Both indigenous (autochthonous) religions and those imported from abroad (allochthonous) are equally facilitated to operate within the legal framework. Nowadays, religions have made significant contributions to the construction of national solidarity, actively participating in and effectively contributing to activities in healthcare, education, and charity, and positively contributing to the overall development of the country. Assessing the contribution role of religions in Vietnam, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc affirmed: "Religions in Vietnam are not only a cultural element but also a truly important resource contributing to the country's development" (Truong Chung, 2019).

However, alongside the positive activities of religions, there are still instances in society where some individuals exploit beliefs and religions for superstitious and divisive purposes, deceiving the people, and even undermining national solidarity. Therefore, in the leadership process, the Communist Party of Vietnam always pays attention to religious affairs, considering the proper resolution of religious policy issues as one of the necessary tasks to ensure national solidarity towards the goal of socio-economic development. Inheriting and developing the viewpoint and policy on religions from previous Party congresses, the 13th National Party Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam affirmed: that religion is a social resource, and it is necessary to promote the cultural and ethical values of religions and enhance the effectiveness of state management in religious affairs. This article aims to understand the viewpoint of the 13th National Party Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam on religions, evaluate the current situation of religious policies, and propose some recommendations to improve religious policies in Vietnam today.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of religion and religious policies has been the focus of research by scholars in recent times. Based on the research objectives, some notable works can be mentioned, such as "*The relationship between politics and religion in the period of international integration and development of market economy with socialist orientation in our country today*" by Ngo Huu Thao (1998); "*Theories of religion and the situation of religion in Vietnam*" by Dang Nghiem Van (2001); "*Religion in the cultural relationship and development in Vietnam*" by Nguyen Hong Duong (2004); The project funded by the Ministry "*55 years of the religious policy of the Party and the State of Vietnam (1945-2000)*" by the Government Religious Committee; "*Vietnamese religion*" by G. Condominas (Journal of Religious Studies, issue 2, 2003); The book "*The issue of religion in the Vietnamese revolution in theory and practice*" by Do Quang Hung (2007); "*The process of renewing perception of the issue of religion and improving the religious policies of our Party and State in the renewal*

*period*" by Tran Thanh Giang (Journal of Philosophy, Issue 9, 2008...). "*Religious policies in Vietnam in the renewal period - Affirming achievements and values*" by Nguyen Thanh Xuan (2023). Through the above works, the authors have addressed many aspects, both theoretical and practical, regarding the issue of religion. However, these works have not explored new perspectives on the issue of religion and religious policies in Vietnam today.

## **METHODS**

**Methodology:** Based on the dialectical and historical materialism of Marxist-Leninist theory, Ho Chi Minh's ideology, combined with the Party's principles and perspectives, as well as the mechanisms, and legal framework of the State.

**Research methods:** Document research method; Systematization method for documents; Comparative and evaluative method; Analytical and synthetic research method.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. New Perspectives of the Communist Party of Vietnam on Religious Issues**

The viewpoint of the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam on religion represents a new development in the party's understanding of religious work, based on the inheritance and creative application of Marxist-Leninist ideology and Ho Chi Minh's thoughts on religion. It is the result of the process of supplementing and developing the party's viewpoint on religious work over different periods. During the national democratic revolution, President Ho Chi Minh's policy of "belief, freedom, solidarity" significantly contributed to the success of the national unity resistance, leading to the complete independence and unification of the country. In 1990, the Party Central Committee issued Resolution 24-NQ/TW on religious work, stating that "Religion is a long-lasting issue. Belief and religion are spiritual needs of a portion of the people. The ethical values of religions are compatible with the construction of a new society," and "religious organizations that are oriented towards the nation, have purposes and regulations consistent with state laws, and have appropriate organizational structures and personnel will be considered by the state for permission to operate" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 1990).

The 9th Central Committee Executive Committee convened the 7th Conference on Religious Work and issued Resolution No. 25-NQ/TW on March 12, 2003, affirming the following perspectives on religion: (1) belief and religion are spiritual needs of a portion of the people, existing and continuing to exist with the nation during the construction of socialism in Vietnam. People of religious faith are part of the national unity bloc. (2) The Communist Party of Vietnam and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam consistently implement policies of national unity. (3) The core content of religious work is mass mobilization. (4) Religious work is the responsibility of the entire political system under the leadership of the Party. (5) Issues of faith and propagation are the responsibilities of religious organizations (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2003).

Effectively addressing religious issues will create a significant premise for implementing national unity. The 12th National Congress of the Communist

Party of Vietnam affirmed: Continue to improve policies and laws on beliefs and religions and promote the cultural and ethical values of religions. Provide support and create conditions for recognized religious organizations to operate according to their charters and regulations, as stipulated by law. Simultaneously, proactively prevent and firmly combat actions that exploit beliefs and religions to divide, undermine national unity, or engage in religious activities contrary to the law.

Currently, the religious landscape in Vietnam is experiencing complex developments, harboring factors that could destabilize the situation. Some citizens do not adhere to the law, and there are unauthorized proselytizing activities exploiting beliefs and religions for superstitious purposes. Disputes and litigations related to religious properties and assets are increasing in some areas, becoming intense and intricate. In certain regions, especially ethnic minority areas, there are instances of exploiting beliefs and religions to conduct oppositional activities, inciting followers to undermine national unity, and causing political instability. These limitations stem from the deficiencies in Vietnam's religious policies, and the slow adjustment of solutions and policy tools to meet practical needs.

The reality of life calls for new guiding perspectives from the Communist Party of Vietnam that are more aligned with reality. Consequently, the state has a basis to issue specific policies to thoroughly address religious issues. At the 13th National Congress, the Communist Party of Vietnam identified a system of key tasks to promote the strength of national unity, socialist democracy, and the people's right to self-determination, enhancing governance, including religious matters. An overview of the viewpoint of the 13th National Congress on religion can be summarized as follows:

Firstly, the 13th National Congress acknowledges and recognizes the contributions of religious communities to the overall development of society: "The religious situation is stable; the majority of clergy, officials, and believers have peace of mind, trust in the leadership of the Party and the State, are attached to and accompany the people, and contribute to fighting against and refuting slanderous allegations, false accusations against the government violating human rights, and religious freedom" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021, vol. 1, p. 45).

Secondly, the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam continues to affirm and develop the viewpoint of freedom regarding religion, belief, and non-belief: "Ensure the freedom of belief, religion of all people according to the provisions of the law" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021, vol. 1, p. 272). This is a new point in the Communist Party of Vietnam's perspective on religious freedom. The viewpoint of the 8th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam on this issue was: "Consistently implement policies respecting the freedom of belief, whether following or not following any religion of citizens. All religions are equal before the law" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 1996). By the 9th National Congress, the Communist Party of Vietnam added the phrase "ensure" after "respect" when referring to freedom of belief, religion, and non-belief, stating: "Consistently implement policies respecting and ensuring the

freedom of belief, whether following or not following any religion, the right to religious activities in accordance with the law" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2001). The orientation for building the country in the transition to socialism (supplemented, developed in 2011) continues to affirm: "Respect and ensure the freedom of belief, religion, and non-belief of the people according to the provisions of the law." At the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam, there is a new development in understanding, as it states: Ensure the freedom of belief, and religion of all people according to the provisions of the law. Here, the phrase "the people" in previous congresses is replaced by "all people," thereby expanding the maximum subject of religious freedom, including "individuals," not only organizations, "citizens," "residents" in the country but also organizations, individuals of foreign nationality practicing religion when living, studying, working in Vietnam as well as Vietnamese people abroad returning to their homeland" (Nguyen Ngoc Huong, 2021).

Thirdly, the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam advocates for "Promoting the cultural values, moral virtues, and resources of religions for the cause of national development" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021, vol. 1, p. 171). This marks a new progression in the Communist Party of Vietnam's perspective on religion. In previous congresses, the viewpoint of the Communist Party of Vietnam was to "Promote the cultural values, moral virtues of religions" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2011). However, at the 13th National Congress, the Communist Party of Vietnam adds the phrase "resources of religions for the cause of national development." Resources can be understood as the entirety of material and non-material values to serve specific development goals for a particular subject. Thus, the 13th National Congress affirms the role of religion as one of the resources in the nation-building and development endeavor on both material and spiritual aspects.

Fourthly, the continuous improvement of policies on religion is emphasized. The 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam stresses: "Focus on perfecting and effectively implementing ethnic and religious policies; have specific policies to address difficulties for ethnic minority communities; effectively implement religious unity, national unity. Crack down on any plots, actions of division, destruction of national unity, hindrance to the country's development" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021, vol. 1, pp. 50-51). Institutionalize the Party's principles, and viewpoints into legal norms, aiming to ensure the enforcement of human rights, with humans as the center and subject of development. Enhancing institutions, and paving the way for economic and social development is a major perspective, frequently emphasized in the Documents of the 13th National Congress of the Party, including the religious field.

Thus, the viewpoint of the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam on religion is a new development in understanding, it is consistent, inheriting and developing the viewpoints of previous congresses on religious work in the new context of the international and domestic situation. From there, the state has the basis to concretize the viewpoint of the Communist Party of Vietnam on religion, supplement, and improve the system of religious

policies to contribute to achieving the goal of promoting cultural values, national strength, realizing progress, social justice, improving people's lives, ensuring harmonious integration between economic development and social development in the current context.

## **2. Challenges Facing Religious Policies in Vietnam Today**

Currently, Vietnam has 16 religions, 36 religious organizations, 04 religious sects, and 01 religious denomination officially recognized and registered for religious activities (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2020), with over 26 million followers, 55,870 clerics, 145,561 religious dignitaries, and 29,396 places of worship (Vu Chien Thang, 2020). Religious organizations and a significant portion of clerics, dignitaries, and religious practitioners operate in accordance with the law, trusting the leadership of the Party and the management of the State, actively contributing to nation-building and defense. As a multi-religious country, Vietnam has effectively implemented religious policies in recent years, contributing to maintaining social stability, and political security, promoting socio-economic development, and improving the material and spiritual lives of the people. However, alongside the achievements, there exist several limitations and shortcomings in addressing religious issues in Vietnam, namely:

### *Firstly, the issue of achieving the goals of religious policies.*

Institutionalizing the viewpoint of the Communist Party of Vietnam on religion, the consistent policies of the Vietnamese State are to respect and create favorable conditions for all citizens to exercise their freedom of religion and belief; value policies of unity and harmony among religions, ensure equality, and non-discrimination based on religion or belief, protect the activities of religious organizations by law, as specified in Article 24 of the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (2013): "1. Everyone has the right to freedom of belief, and religion, to follow or not to follow any religion. All religions are equal before the law; 2. The State respects and protects the freedom of belief and religion; 3. No one shall infringe upon the freedom of belief, religion, or abuse religion to violate the law" (National Assembly, 2013).

However, in the past, with the advent of democratization and globalization trends in history, opportunities have arisen for old religions to revive, new religions to enter, and many distorted religions to emerge. The dynamic activities of religions inside and outside the country have been exploited by hostile forces, through various means, taking advantage of the rhetoric of religious freedom and inciting religious conflicts to sabotage Vietnam. Currently, there are phenomena of hostile forces distorting and falsely accusing Vietnam of violating human rights, religious freedom, and beliefs to undermine the socialist construction in Vietnam. There are not a few religious activities tainted with superstitious and extremist colors, contrary to traditional culture, and not permitted by law, such as activities of the Church of God the Mother, Falun Gong, Unified Buddhist Church, etc. Some clerics of religions engage in many activities that are not purely religious. They have exploited preaching sessions to oppose the government, with many speeches posted on social media distorting Vietnam's history. Some recent religious activities violating the law include the Evangelical Missionary Church of Redemption (Go, Vap, Ho Chi

Minh City) violating the Prime Minister's directive, regulations of the Ministry of Health and local authorities on COVID-19 prevention and control, causing serious consequences (Le Phong, 2021).

These issues significantly impact the efforts to achieve the goals of religious policies in Vietnam in general. This raises concerns about the loose and inadequate implementation of religious policies, affecting the fundamental objectives of current religious policies.

*Secondly, the issue of institutionalizing religious policies.*

Based on the viewpoint and policies of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the State's policies towards religion, state agencies with jurisdiction have institutionalized into legal documents directly regulating the field of beliefs and religions. For example, the Law on Beliefs and Religions was adopted by the 14th National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on November 18, 2016; Decree No. 162/ND-CP dated December 30, 2017, provides detailed provisions and measures for the implementation of the Law on Beliefs and Religions. The overall achievements in institutionalizing religious policies can be summarized as follows: creating a legal framework for religious activities and managing religious activities; providing the basis for levels and sectors to manage and implement religious affairs in a serious and fundamental manner, ensuring and respecting the people's freedom of belief and religion, limiting religious activities that violate the law; being a sharp tool to combat any schemes and activities exploiting religion to oppose the Communist Party, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam; making an important contribution to consolidating solidarity, promoting the internal strength of the entire nation in economic development, and maintaining political and social stability.

However, alongside these achievements, the current legal documents on beliefs and religions in Vietnam also reveal some shortcomings and limitations, which pose difficulties for religious activities and state management of beliefs and religions, such as:

Firstly, concerning the Law on Beliefs and Religions of 2016, there are several shortcomings, such as: (1) The concept of "dependent religious organizations" is not clearly defined, leading to difficulties for state management at all levels regarding dependent religious organizations; (2) Lack of consistency between the provisions on "Dependent religious organizations are organizations under religious organizations, established according to charters, regulations of religious organizations" and "Religious bases including pagodas, churches, prayer houses, temples, churches, headquarters of religious organizations, other legitimate bases of religious organizations"; (3) Unclear determination of the authority to receive notifications of ordination in religion leads to difficulties in local management; (4) Determining the "legal venue" of religions is not suitable for both religious organization structure and state management practices; (5) Receiving notifications of religious activities still has many shortcomings causing difficulties for localities, especially commune-level People's Committees; (6) The issue of the subject registering religious activities is still uneven among subjects, not in line with the trend of administrative procedure reform and not suitable for the reality of religious activities; (7) Regarding the management of religious titles,

positions, and the movement of religious establishments, there are still shortcomings leading to state management agencies being unable to manage religious titles, positions, and religious establishments; (8) Implementing criminal record checks is not suitable for cases where personnel are followers participating in the organization machinery of religious groups; (9) Regarding administrative management of religious training facilities, there are deficiencies, leading to overlooking the role of local management, territorial jurisdiction of provincial People's Committees, creating gaps in state management of religious training facilities; (10) In terms of state management in the field of beliefs, the law only regulates issues related to personnel of religious facilities and religious activities. Therefore, local authorities face many difficulties in resolving issues related to the legal status of religious organizations and facilities (Nguyen Vu Quoc and Le Tam Dac, 2019).

Secondly, concerning Government Decree No. 162/ND-CP dated December 30, 2017, detailing a number of articles and measures for implementing the Law on Beliefs and Religions, there are some shortcomings, such as: (1) Separating state management content on religious festivals, managing revenues from organizing religious festivals to cultural management agencies leads to lack of unity and consistency in state management of beliefs; (2) Regarding the implementation of the right to use the land of religious organizations, it is stipulated: "The conversion, transfer, gift, lease, mortgage, contribution of assets using land use rights shall be carried out according to the relevant legal provisions," which overlaps with the 2013 Land Law; (3) Regarding the property responsibilities of recognized legal entities, the 2015 Civil Code stipulates: "Legal entities bear civil liability with their property..." However, for religious organizations when recognized as legal entities, organizing assessment, and implementing property obligations of religious organizations to other subjects in legal relations will face many difficulties, low feasibility, and will also be constrained by the provisions of other related legal normative documents (Nguyen Vu Quoc and Le Tam Dac, 2019).

In the face of these shortcomings, limitations, and existing institutional issues in religious policies, it is necessary to conduct studies and propose solutions to overcome them to improve the institutional framework, create conditions for building effective tools to implement religious policies in Vietnam and contribute to the country's socio-economic development in the current context.

*Thirdly, regarding the policy tools for religious affairs.*

In addition to the institutional limitations in religious policies, there are practical challenges hindering the achievement of current religious policy objectives. Specifically: (a) Despite attention to propaganda and dissemination work, the effectiveness remains low; the application of laws in practice is not uniform in some places; some localities are still uncertain in implementing and applying laws in daily life. (b) The coordination between central ministries and sectors, as well as between local departments and agencies, in managing religious beliefs and organizations is not sufficiently tight or regular. (c) The organizational structure for state management of religious affairs is not

commensurate with the requirements of the task; the capacity of officials and civil servants in some localities is uneven, and the assignment and deployment of personnel for religious work at district and commune levels are not rational. (d) Issues persist regarding the allocation of land for religious purposes, financial management, and construction, renovation, upgrading, and transformation of religious facilities. (e) Violations of religious activities still occur in various forms, with detection and handling sometimes not timely, resolute, or effective, with many complex and prolonged cases affecting the effectiveness of state management and efforts to consolidate unity among the people (Bao Yen, 2021).

On the other hand, illegal religious activities continue to occur, such as the unauthorized bestowal of religious titles, and illegal printing, publication, importation, and circulation of religious texts and materials. Illegal preaching activities persist in some ethnic minority areas and border regions. Internal conflicts within certain religious organizations are on the rise. Anti-government activities by elements of dissent within religious groups are increasing. There is also the emergence of new religious beliefs, cults, and deviant practices that are difficult to manage and are impacting society.

This raises urgent issues regarding the development of effective policy tools for religious affairs in Vietnam. The dynamic global situation has significant implications for religious beliefs and practices, necessitating research and attention to develop solutions to address the challenges and difficulties in implementing religious policies. Therefore, there is a need to systematically improve the policy tools for religious affairs to meet practical needs.

### **3. Some proposals and recommendations for improving religious policies according to the perspective of the 13th National Party Congress in Vietnam**

Firstly, enhance the institutional framework of religious policies. During the process of policy implementation, practical issues and limitations will inevitably arise, exposing deficiencies in the institutional framework of policies. Therefore, it is necessary to study the current legal shortcomings and limitations regarding religious beliefs and practices. The state should conduct impact assessments of policies based on various specific criteria such as economic impact, administrative procedures, social impact, gender impact, and legal system impact. The scientific evaluation results serve as a basis for constructing and improving the institutional framework of religious policies, including the Law on Beliefs and Religions, as well as related guidelines and regulations, to avoid inconsistencies with the legal system and administrative procedures. To achieve this, consultation with religious experts, officials, and civil servants involved in religious affairs is essential, with particular emphasis on gathering feedback from policy beneficiaries. Adjustments addressing shortcomings and limitations aim to enhance the effectiveness of current religious policies in Vietnam. Given the country's diverse religious landscape, the state should prioritize studying the characteristics of each religion to issue appropriate legal documents.

Secondly, refine the solutions and policy tools related to religion. Addressing the shortcomings and limitations in the current implementation of

religious policies requires refining solutions and policy tools, which is an important task. The practical work of religion today sets out the following basic tasks: (1) Refining solutions to impact policy targets (believers, clergy, religious officials) through economic incentives to enhance socio-economic development policies, programs, and projects, improve the material, cultural, and spiritual lives of people of various religious beliefs. (2) Refining solutions to impact policy targets through strengthening community relations within religious groups. (3) Refining solutions to impact policy targets by promoting social values.

Thirdly, enhances the capacity of the implementing subjects of religious policies. Building a team of highly specialized and capable professionals to handle complex situations related to religious affairs is crucial. Emphasizing investment in knowledge enrichment and skill enhancement for the workforce is extremely important and necessary. The training of religious affairs officials still faces many limitations and shortcomings, especially in determining the content, form, and methods of training suitable for the target group of religious management officials. Currently, the competence of the workforce in implementing religious policies at the local level is still limited. The lack of necessary knowledge and skills when dealing with clergy and religious followers is due to inadequate training and orientation of religious affairs officials, with some being assigned dual roles or transferred from other departments, leading to failure to meet task requirements. Therefore, training religious affairs officials must have a long-term, scientific plan; innovate training content and methods through diverse and practical approaches; enhance survey activities to draw lessons from practical experiences; and strengthen skills training for officials implementing religious policies.

Fourthly, intensify the propaganda and education on religious policies. In line with Resolution No. 25-NQ/TW on religious affairs, the core content of religious work is mass mobilization. Therefore, it is necessary to define propaganda and mobilization work to help people of various religious beliefs understand the state's religious policies to strengthen the faith of religious followers. To achieve this, attention should be focused on several tasks:(a) Enhancing the role of socio-political organizations from central to local levels;(b) Localities need to actively coordinate, and propose to competent authorities for consideration and effective resolution of incidents and issues related to religion, especially timely prevention and prevention of exploitation of religious issues for political purposes; (c) Innovating propaganda work by diversifying forms of propaganda, integrating political and legal content with traditional cultural values;(d) Timely understanding the legitimate aspirations of clergy, practitioners, and religious followers.

## **CONCLUSION**

The 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam, under the theme Strengthening the construction and rectification of the Party and political system, pure and strong; arousing the aspirations for national development, promoting the will and strength of the great national unity combined with the strength of the times; continuing to comprehensively and synchronously promote renovation; building and firmly safeguarding the

Fatherland, maintaining a peaceful and stable environment; striving for Vietnam to become a developed country by the middle of the 21st century, following the direction of socialism", has demonstrated the highest political determination of the Party and the people for a resilient Vietnam.

With the goal of uniting the strength of the nation with the strength of the times, the viewpoint of the 13th Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam reflects a new awareness of religious issues, considering religions as true resources for the construction and development of the country. It prioritizes perfecting institutions and policies to respect and ensure the freedom of belief and religion for all citizens. This is the basis for the state to improve religious policies, build a great unity bloc, and leverage resources to participate in the cause of protecting and building socialism in Vietnam today.

This study is an upgraded version of research presented in the Proceedings of the National Scientific Conference on the Comprehensive Study of Documents of the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam, used in teaching political theory subjects at various university education institutions, particularly at the National Economics University in Hanoi, Vietnam.

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