RELIGIOUS FAITH OF ETHNIC MINORITY PROTESTANTS IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLAND OF VIETNAM

Vu Dung¹, Truong Xuan Cu², Tran Minh Tuan², Nguyen Thi Mai Lan², Vu Thu Trang², Nguyen Sy Thu³, Phung Dinh Man⁴, Dau Minh Long⁴, Le Minh Thien¹, Ngo Thi Hanh⁵, Le Minh Nguyen⁶, Nguyen Thi Quy⁷

¹Institute of Psychology, ²Graduate Academy of Social Sciences, ³Ho Chi Minh University of Pedagogy, ⁴Hue University, ⁵Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, ⁶Hanoi National University of Education, ⁷People’s Police University

*Corresponding author email: vudungtamly@gmail.com

Abstract

Religious faith is the central concept explaining the fast development of Protestantism in Vietnam in recent decades. A survey was conducted on 4,186 ethnic minority Protestants in the Central Highland of Vietnam to study their belief in God and the spiritual world. Findings showed that ethnic minority Protestants in Vietnam held very strong faith in God and his power, as well as the existence of Heaven and Hell. Protestant faith was negatively correlated with educational level of followers. Socioeconomic status and personality trait of ethnic minorities are plausible explanations for their religious faith.

Keywords: Faith; Religious faith; God; Protestant; Ethnic minority.

1. Introduction

Religious faith is the cognitive belief rooted in religious followers’ value system, and it can influence the behavior of religious communities and individual followers. Religious faith plays an important role in followers’ religious life. It is central to followers’ beliefs, thoughts and emotions; it can change the thinking, motivation, lifestyle and behaviors of the religious community as well as individual followers.

Religious faith is key to any religion, as the term “religious follower”, by definition, is a person with religious belief. A person cannot become a part of the religious community, or become a religious follower, without religious faith. Research on religious faith from a psychological perspective tend to focus on (i) drawing the psychological portrait of religious followers, and (ii) explaining the existence and development of religious.

Protestantism is a relatively new religion in Vietnam, as compared to other major religions like Buddhism, Catholicism and Islam¹. In recent years, Protestantism has flourished quickly in Vietnam, especially in the Northwestern area and the Central Highland. This article sought to explain the development of Protestantism in the Central Highland as a result of religious faith of Protestants in this area.

The development of Protestantism in the Central Highland of Vietnam
Protestantism is a branch of Christianity formed after the Reformation in the 16th century in Europe. At first, Protestants were considered evil by Catholics as they posed a serious threat to the existence of the former, leading to the name “Protestantism”. The term Protestantism was later used to refer to this new branch of Christianity. As such, Protestantism is a new religion when compared to Christianity or Catholicism.

Protestantism entered Vietnam at the end of the 19th century through the Christian and Missionary Alliance of America (CMA) under the name of Christianity (Cơ đốc giáo) or reformed Christianity (Cơ đốc giáo cải cách). It was until the 1920s, 1930s when the Bible was translated into Vietnamese by Tran Van Dong and Phan Khoi that the term Tin lành was used to refer to Protestantism.

At the beginning, the CMA encountered many difficulties in spreading Protestantism in Vietnam due to political, cultural and ideological pressures, not to mention the prohibition of the French and Japanese. CMA set up its first location in Da Nang in 1911. Until 1945, there were only 15,000 Protestants in Vietnam under the management of 100 religious groups. These numbers grew to 60,000 followers, 154 groups and 100 pastors in 1954.

With regard to the development of Protestantism in the Central Highland, in 1926, 15 years after the first CMA office in Da Nang, a Canadian pastor named A.H. Jackson visited the Central Highland to find a new location for missionary services. Three years later, Jackson and his wife decided to move to Da Lat province to carry out their mission while teaching English for the local. The Jacksons learnt C’ho dialect – a dialect of an ethnic group in the Central Highland – from a C’ho man named Hasol. In 1931, Hasol became the first ethnic minority Protestant in the Central Highland. Hasol later became a pastor and left crucial impacts to the Protestant community in the area.

From the 1940s, Protestantism began to expand on a large scale in the Central Highland with the participation of the CMA and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam. In its 19th Congress, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam affirmed its support for missions in the Central Highland, targeting local ethnic minority groups in 4 provinces in this area. Since then, most pastors and missionaries of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam took turn to stay and work in the Central Highland. CMA also boosted missions in the Central Highland by sending various missionaries to areas of the Central Highland, such as sending the Jacksons to the C’ho community in 1929, C.E. Travis to the Cham community, I.R. Stebbins to the Paco community in 1931, O. Nyth, G.H. Smith and their wives to the Ede, M’pong, Giarai communities in 1932 and 1934, and G.C. Ferry to the Choro community in 1934. After the second world war, more pastors of CMA visited the Central Highland such as N.R. Ziemer, G.E. Irwin, T.G. Mangham, etc.

The results were constant progresses in the number of ethnic minority Protestants in the Central Highland. If in 1954, there were 1,000 Protestants from 11 ethnic minority groups, these numbers rose to 6,000 Protestants from 14 ethnic groups in 1950, and 118,905 Protestants in 1973 (see Figure 1).

In 1973, the number of Protestants accounted for 10.75% of the population of 14 ethnic groups in the Central Highland. At that time, 216 churches, 2 Christian schools, 8 missions and 3 medical centers were built in the area. The Churu ethnic group had the highest percentage of Protestants (95%), followed by the Gie Trieng ethnic group (90%). Until 2010, the number of Protestants in the Central Highland has quadrupled to 500,000 people with 1,850 Protestant groups and 1,244 pastors and missionaries.

Research on religious faith from a psychological perspective

Many research have been done on religious faith. We listed here 4 main research directions in this field: (a) research claiming that religious faith is an instinctive, inherited phenomenon (Coe4, Berxoi5,
Freud⁶), (b) research claiming that religious faith is the consequence of socioeconomic events (Feur-bach, Barth, Tarveev, Marx, Lenin, Enghen, Weber, Durkheim), (c) research claiming that religious faith has a psychological root (Leuba, James, Maslow, Johnson), and (d) research of Vietnamese authors on Protestantism and Protestant faith (Hoang Minh Do⁷; Phan Viet Phong⁸; Dang Nghiem Van⁹; Mai Thanh Hai¹⁰; Nguyen Thanh Xuan¹¹; Vu Dung¹¹; Le Van Hao¹²; Vuong Kim Oanh¹³).

These works share the view that religious faith is human belief in a supernatural force providing salvation and protection and the belief in a beautiful spiritual world after death. Karl Barth¹⁴ (1886-1968) believed that religious faith composed of 2 opposite aspects: the power of supernatural forces and the weakness of human being in front of these forces. Marx and Lenin considered religious faith the human belief in gods, demons, or miracles when human felt desperate in their fight against nature. Dang Nghiem Van⁹ defined religious faith as “the belief in a surreal, obscure world created by human imagination”. According to Trinh Dinh Bay¹⁵, religious faith is the belief in the church, the Bible, Buddhist scriptures, Heaven and Nirvana. Proposing a more general definition, Vu Dung¹¹ stated that religious faith is human belief in the existence of supernatural forces and the spiritual world.

In this study, we relied on this view to study Protestant faith.

2. Method

Subjects and research site

We conducted a survey on 4,186 ethnic minority Protestants in the Central Highland. Subjects came from 7 ethnic groups: M’nong, Ede, Giarai, Bana, Gie Trieng, Ha Lang and Cil. Research site included 5 provinces in the Central Highland: Daklak, Dak Nong, Gia Lai, Kontum, and Lam Dong. Details about demographic information of respondents were reported in Table 1. Most respondents were literate (86.8%), under 50 years old (79.9%), official Protestant (97.5%) and doing agriculture-related jobs (91.7%).

Measures

The Religious Faith survey was designed with 6 questions: (i) belief in God, (ii) belief in the power of God, (iii) belief in spiritual forces apart from God, (iv) belief in another world (Heaven and Hell), (v) belief in the church and Protestant organizations, and (vi) belief in personal power. All questions had multiple-choice and open-ended questions. For multiple-choice questions, respondent selected 4 options: weak, average, strong, very strong; with higher score implied stronger belief. In this article, we focused on discussing Protestant’s belief in God and another world, i.e. questions i to iv.

3. Results and Discussion

Belief in God

99.4% Protestants reported that they believed in God. Only 0.6% of respondents reported hard to answer, all of whom were unofficial followers. The majority of Protestants (94.9%) claimed their belief in God was strong and very strong. It was notable that 82.2% Protestants reported very strong faith.

Open-ended questions revealed more about Protestants’ belief in God’s existence:

“The Bible says that if we believe in God, when we die our souls can be with Him on Heaven” (ethnic Bana Protestant, male, 50 years old, Gia Lai province).
“When we believe in Him, He will always be in our mind. His words teach me that He always stands by me. The Bible says that Jesus was nailed on the cross for human sins, He died for 3 days then He revived to live with his disciples, 40 days later He returned to Father. Since then He became invisible, and now He lives in the mind of those believing in Him” (ethnic Ede Protestant, male, 25 years old, Daklak province).

This belief might result from the fact that the majority of ethnic minority Protestants in the Central Highland had correct knowledge about God. 81.5% Protestants in this survey could identify God as the Trinity (the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit). Only 16.9% Protestants identified God as either Jesus or the Father, and only 0.1% respondents (4 persons) identified God as the God of the Sky (Giàng).

When compared by educational background, Protestants with lower educational level had stronger faith in God, $\chi (6) = 34.77, p= 0.000$. In other words, the more educated minority Protestants were, the less powerful their belief in God, despite the fact that the percentage of people with secondary school and above education having “very strong” faith in God remained very high (more than 80%).

When compared by ethnic, there was a difference in the strength of belief among 7 ethnics participating in the survey: $\chi (12) = 208.94, p= 0.000$. Only ethnic Ede had 60% Protestants with “very strong” belief in God; while this number in the 9 remaining ethnics ranged around 80% and above, with the highest rate belonged to ethnic Bana (90.6%), followed by ethnic M’nung (88.1%) and Gie Trieng (87.6%). However, it is important to note that while the rate of ethnic Ede Protestants with very strong belief in God might be lower than other ethnics, the total percentage of ethnic Ede Protestants with “strong” and “very strong” belief in God was still 96.9%, significantly higher than ethnic Ede Protestants with middling belief (3.1%).

No difference in gender and age were found.

Belief in God’s existence

When asked about the form of God’s existence, 45.2% of Protestants stated that God can neither be seen nor felt, he can only be experienced through praying. To this group, God is invisible and the only way of connecting with God is prayer. 39% believed that God can be both visible and invisible, and 10% of Protestants claimed that God is visible. Of the two later groups, when asked about God’s visibility, 20.5% Protestants stated that they experienced God’s existence in his daily acts; through the Bible, pictures and symbols of God (14.5%); through feeling God’s existence in one’s soul (18.2%), and some claimed that God is everywhere (20.2%). It is interesting to find that 12.8% of this group believed that God is an ordinary person.

Therefore, the majority of Protestants believed that God is invisible. If visible, God was mostly experienced through spiritual connection (praying, spiritual communication, etc.).

Belief in God’s power

Although God might not exist in material form, the majority of Protestants believed that he has great power and impacts to human. Table 3 listed the forms of God’s power and Protestants’ belief in this power.

A mean of 3.72 implied that Protestants had strong belief in all forms of God’s power. 98.9% of Protestants believed that God created human and other beings on Earth. They believed that God is the almighty, the source of life and creativity.

In open-ended questions, Protestants detailed how God created the world.
“God created the Earth and everything on it. He is the savior, the life, he lives forever and exists by himself” (Male, 70 years old, Dak Lak province).

“God is the source of creativity. He created trees, the sun, the moon, the rain and the wind, so that human can live until now. Jesus is God, He lived on Earth for 30 years in the land of the Jews, then died, resurrect and ascend to Heaven. He gives life to those believing in Him” (Male, 31 years old, ethnic Giarai, Gia Lai province).

Many Protestants also believed in God’s ability to save human from their sins and fulfill their wishes, 98.1% and 90.4% respectively. Some believed that God helps them believe in themselves and their capability of overcoming problems. God helps human rise above temptations and do good deeds. Other claimed that God exists in their daily life, thus his assistance is available in any daily act.

Another manifestation of belief in God was Protestants’ belief in God’s power to judge human. They believed that God punishes those who do not follow Him. It was their fear of punishment that strengthened their faith.

“If you don’t believe in God, you will be judged and punished. Souls unprotected by Protestantism and God will not be saved, will go to Hell and never exists.” (Male, 57 years old, Dak Lak province).

“God is the king of all kings, on the last day He will judge human, those who do not believe Him will become children of devils.” (Male, 43 years old, ethnic Bana, primary school education, Gia Lai province).

Belief in another world (i.e. spiritual world)

97.8% Protestants believed in the existence of another world, with 89% of them held very strong belief. Only 0.9% Protestants did not believe, and 1.4% found it hard to answer. The spiritual world was identified as Heaven and Hell. Ethnic minority Protestants believed that Heaven is a beautiful world in which humans live forever and happily together with God. Heaven is only for those who believe in and follow God. Contrast to Heaven, Hell is a terrifying world of death and misery. It is for those who do not believe in and follow God.

“According to our Bible, God prepares two places for human: Heaven and Hell. Hell is the punishment for those who don’t believe in Him. Heaven is for his followers.” (Male, 36 years old, ethnic Giarai, high school education, Gia Lai province).

“People believing in Jesus will live forever in Heaven. Who doesn’t believe in Jesus will die forever in Hell.” (Male, 31 years old, ethnic Giarai, secondary school education, Gia Lai province).

When asked about Heaven, ethnic minority Protestants visioned many different pictures of Heaven, but they agreed on 3 points: (i) Heaven is for those believing in God, (ii) life in Heaven is a life of eternal happiness, and (iii) Heaven is a beautiful place. It is noteworthy that Protestants identified the difference between good people and people believing in God, and between the place for God followers after death and the place for human after death. They clearly specified that Heaven is for the former, not the latter.

Hell was pictured as a world of fear, a place for those who did not believe in God and Christianity. It was a place of punishment, where human could not die but suffer from eternal miseries.
To sum up, Protestants believed that 3 worlds co-exist: High up was Heaven, in the middle was the current life on Earth, and below was Hell. Whether human has a place in Heaven or Hell depends on their conformity to religious norms, first and foremost is respect and belief in God.

Protestants with higher educational background tended to believed less strongly in Heaven and Hell: $\chi^2 (9) = 57.99; p = 0.000$.

When compared by ethnic, ethnic Bana had the highest rate of Protestants strongly believed in Heaven and Hell (90.6%), followed by ethnic M’nong and Gie Trieng (88.1% and 87.6% respectively). Ethnic Ede had the least number of Protestants strongly believed in the spiritual words (60.6%).

No difference was found between Protestants of different gender and age.

**Discussion**

This study found that ethnic minority Protestants in the Central Highland held very strong faith in God and his teachings. The percentage of believers varied around 90% regardless of issues surveyed. Protestants with weaker faith tended to be unofficial followers. This result was similar to the study in 2006 by Vuong Kim Oanh, which reported that 99% ethnic minority Protestants in Gia Lai believed in God\(^1\). Research by Vuong Duy Quang, Phan Viet Phong and Le Van Hao on Protestants of ethnic H’mong in northern Vietnam also found that ethnic minority Protestants had a strong faith in God\(^16,8,12\).

When compared by demographic characteristics of follower, belief in God and belief in spiritual worlds demonstrated similar patterns. Ethnic minority Protestants with higher educational background had weaker faith in God’s power and the existence of Heaven and Hell. This is in line with Marxist view of religious faith: the less knowledge human has of the world, the stronger their belief in God is. In a study of Hoa Hao Buddhism in Vietnam, Nguyen Minh Chau\(^17\) also found that people with primary and secondary school education had stronger belief in Religious Leader Huynh Phu So than people with high school education.

Protestants of ethnic Bana, M’nong and Gie Trieng had stronger faith in God and the existence of Heaven and Hell than other ethnics. Among ethnics surveyed, Protestants of ethnic Ede had weaker faith. However, it is important to note that ethnic differences in faith, though statistically significant, were not too big.

The prevalence and flourishing of Protestantism in the Central Highland can be due to many reasons. Marxists could rely on the low economic status of ethnic minority in the Central Highland to explain their reliance in supernatural forces to seek for protection. Despite significant economic growth in the Central Highland in recent decades, the life of ethnic minorities in the area remains difficult because they still rely on outdated farming techniques and simple tools. Their inability to fulfill personal needs, first and foremost material needs, has led to their dependence on God as a protector and Heaven as a shelter for the soul. On the other hand, Protestantism has brought positive changes to the life of its followers, especially ethnic minorities in the Central Highland. Ethnic minority people, especially men, consider drinking as a tradition. The Vietnam Department of Preventive Medicine reported that the rate of alcohol addiction among ethnic minorities has been increasing and has always been higher in both males and females than ethnic Kinh (i.e. the majority)\(^18\). Thus, the strict prohibition of smoking, alcohol drinking, stealing and fighting by Protestant norms has helped improve the quality of life of ethnic minority Protestants in the Central Highland. In other words, Protestantism not only enriches the spiritual life of ethnic minority in the Central Highland but it also contributes to their healthier lifestyle\(^19\).
The second reason is the success of missionaries in spreading Protestantism in the Central Highland. Spreading Protestantism is an important mission written in the Charter of the Evangelical Church of North Vietnam. In order to introduce Protestantism to ethnic minorities in the Central Highland, the Bible was translated into indigenous languages. Missionaries tend to start establishing a relationship with the local by home visiting, helping with daily tasks and introducing Protestant teachings through daily interactions. Interested people are given Bible, books, brochures and are invited to church sessions. The new Protestant will then become a “witness” to his family and friends. This method allows Protestantism to develop steadily over time and become the fastest growing religion in the Central Highland. Moreover, many researchers agreed that the naive, truthful, sometimes inconfident personality of ethnic minority people in the Central Highland might contribute to their high acceptance of a new religion. Ethnic minority people can easily accept gifts and financial support of missionaries, as well as believe in promises of salvation.

The third reason is the strong bond between Protestantism and ethnic identity in the Central Highland. One of the key features of Protestantism in the Central Highland is its adaptation to local culture and its connection with local identity. Protestant faith becomes a means to connect members of an ethnic group and to connect between ethnic groups by establishing common values among individuals and communities. This connection is so strong that threats to religious belief and freedom of Protestants are considered threats to the ethnic community. Events like the protest of the Montagnard Dega Association in the Central Highland in 2001 and 2004 are clear examples of the association between Protestantism and ethnic identity.

4. Conclusion

Protestantism in Vietnam has had a shorter history than Catholicism, Buddhism or Islam, yet it is the fastest growing religion, especially among the ethnic communities in the Central Highland. This study found that ethnic minority Protestants in the Central Highland had a very strong belief in God and the spiritual words (Heaven and Hell). They believed that God is the almighty and those believing in God would be guaranteed a nice place in Heaven and can stay away from Hell. Protestant belief only varied significantly by Protestants’ educational background and ethnic. Explanations for the prevalence of Protestantism in the Central Highland were discussed based on the nature of Protestantism and its development in the Central Highland.

6. References

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