

## Challenges for Religious Communication in New Social Status and Cultural Forms in the Vietnamese Context

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### 1. Background

Vietnam is a socialist one-party system state ruled by the Communist Party of Vietnam. In the last 25 years, the country has made an impressive economic development. In fact, in 1986, the government launched a political and economic renewal program called ĐỔI MỚI (renovation or reform) which changes from a centralized economy to a so called socialist-oriented market economy. This step brings Vietnam out of isolation from the outside world and leads it to join the world economy. In 2010, Vietnam reached the status of a lower middle income country. In the course of national development, Vietnam ambitiously strives to become a modern industrial country by 2020. The progress is continuing.

This modernization process causes significant changes in societal perspective and inevitably also in cultural perspective. As the country opens itself to the outside world, mainly for the sake of economic development, it comes to experience international encounters. The process of globalization in many respects affects the Vietnamese society as well as its cultural life. Moreover, modern forms of social communication definitely contribute to cultural and societal changes in Vietnam. This has repercussion in preserving and communicating traditional values. In this context, the paper will reflect on new social structures and cultural forms created by modern development in Vietnam and facilitated by modern social communications. It will consider the dynamics of this changing process and the consequences for communicating religious values whereby the reflection is limited

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to the situation of the Christian community as an example of religious communities living in Vietnamese society.

### 2. Changes in Social Structures and Cultural Forms

In the course of industrialization in the last 25 years in Vietnam, industrial parks have been built up in the periphery of the two metropolitan cities of Hanoi and Saigon, and other big cities of Vietnam. The government tries to build up as many as these so called “Industrial Centers” as possible. This step of modernization has brought about great change in the basic structure of the Vietnamese society. The basic structure of the Vietnamese society is the village community which is determined and influenced by the agricultural mentality: the pace of life, the circumstances of life, the perception, the work, symbolic expressions etc. are mostly influenced by this mentality. In village society the culture, or symbolic repertoire, is reasonably homogeneous and the boundaries of culture and community are largely coterminous. However, people now flock to the newly built industrial parks in order to look for a new chance in life with better job and opportunities in education and other life aspirations. They are mostly young people. This leads to a new situation for the community as well as for the people who settle themselves to a new place.

Firstly, many village communities experience a change in their social setting. Young people and persons of middle age are missing because they went to look for job in modern cities. Only a few of them can do the work in the land which is left behind by their family members. The society and ecology gets into imbalance. From a social and cultural point of view, there is a lack of a smooth communication process between generations. In other words, there is a lack of ‘potential bearers’ of traditional goods and values. One will see that only old people and children remain in these communities. In addition, people in these provinces somehow come in contact with modern society through modern communications. This mostly happens in young generation. In addition their family members or community members who are working in modern areas bring back new cultural elements.

In this way the community learns new lifestyles, new thoughts, new world with different values, norms, patterns, etc. They still live in their old cultural and social context, but somehow affected by new modern cultural elements. All these aspects make communicating of traditional goods and values difficult.

Secondly, people who left their home place in order to look for new job, they come to new places where the life and the work conditions, and the social environment are totally different. In a modern society, additionally affected by globalization, these people live in multicultural situation, and cultural repertoires are used in different ways, in different institutional contexts. Further, the situation is different in the network of relationships. In this new context they are no more the one they were, but they are also not the people of there. They are somehow people “in between”.<sup>1</sup> The ways of life, the symbolic languages, the view, the life patterns, norms etc. which they gained from home are different to the new situation. A transforming progress of uprooting and acculturation begins.

James Lull’s words may be used to describe the situation:

“The challenge for people today is to navigate and combine an unprecedented range of cultural territories and resources ranging from relatively unfamiliar terrain imported to the self through technological mediations and human migrations of various types, to territory that is far more familiar and stable, such as that offered by religion, nation, and family, in order to invent combinations that satisfy individual’s changing needs and preferences.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Eilers, Franz-Josef. (2012) *Communicating between Cultures: An Introduction to Intercultural Communication*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Manila: Logos (Divine Word) Publications. 132-133. Based on Victor Turner, Eilers describes the people “in between” as those “who may be initiands or novices in passage from one social cultural stage and status to another, or even whole populations undergoing transition... are ‘neither here nor there’.”

<sup>2</sup> Lull, James. (2001). ed., *Culture in the Communication Age*, London and New York: Routledge. 138.

In this context, it is essentially about the matter of caring for, of shaping or transforming the identity of individuals, of a communal unity, and certainly of a religious community. The consequences are profound. In a multi-cultural, multi-religious modern society, traditional institutions like religions, existing social organizations, governmental organizations, etc. face an unprecedented challenge in communicating their values and orders which are hitherto prevalent to their societies. Especially, modern technologies contribute to the complexity of the problems and challenges. Cultural information, symbolic forms, ideas, etc. can easily be reproduced, edited, and re-sent through modern means of communication. This leads to different ways of interpretation and perception of the individual which challenge traditional patterns of thought, perception, belief and values. Within this context religion provides an interpretation of human life. It proffers values through which people may come up with issues happening in their lives and those values determine social interaction among them. However, in the new situation this needs a high sensitivity and patient attentiveness to explain the meaning of life in a multicultural and multi-religious context because there are in addition other layers of meaning in the conception of culture and religious belief and values of the people today.

### **3. Changes in the Perspective of Social Communication**

New social structures and new cultural forms bring along new ways of communicating in society. Before the stage of modernization Vietnamese people have mostly lived in an ordered relation, determined by the large family, neighborhood, village community, and community of the adherents of a religion. Within this order they acquired communicative forms such as interpersonal communication, face-to-face communication, group communication, and communication through ritual forms developed by the village community. Values and cultural goods have been communicated through oral communication or traditional ways. The religious community is the most important place where different ways are used to convey religious values, e.g. in liturgical celebrations, through performing dances, storytelling, performing dramas, music, through entertainment plays which have

traditional characters of Vietnamese culture, etc. In those communicative activities cultural elements are also used to transmit faith content, and in this way cultural goods are also handed down.

These kinds of social communication become less when many people abandon their home place in order to seek for better life conditions. There is a lack of young people and people of middle age in most village communities who mediate between the old generation and younger generation in the cultural perspective as ‘potential bearers’ in communicating cultural and religious values as it was in the past. This disparate social setting leads to cultural impoverishment. In addition adolescents who still live at home come into contact with other worlds through modern means of social communication such as TV, magazines, especially through the Internet. They gather information, different values, concepts, etc. This creates a big cultural gap between the old and the young generation. In a cultural perspective the meanings, symbolic forms, the ways they communicate are much different.

People who work far away come home and bring new lifestyles, new perspective, values and norms from their workplace and new life circumstance. It is interesting to follow the way my nephews organize their work as they come home. They are working with foreign colleagues, specifically with the French people. They have learned the way those people organize their work and time, the way they think and behave in interaction. My nephews have given up the sense of time they have acquired in their locale. It was more “flexible” and oriented on events of life. They are adjusted to new foods, way of expression, and habits of daily life in the modern city. Sometimes they are somehow nostalgic for certain things in the past, but they will not come back to the old life context.

In modern society, where international cooperation, collaboration, and encounters happen, people can clearly see the traits of globalization. There is no more a pure Vietnamese culture. There are experiences of multi-ethnic and multi-national culture as well as multi-religious experiences. Many young people told me of their feelings of confusion,

of helplessness, sometimes of fear. It is hard to distinguish various elements from the other. All things seem to be right and just in certain context. Because of that it is not easy for them to make a choice. They look for other men coming from the same local and organize themselves to a group in order to support each other. They establish a website for regular connecting. They develop a way of dealing with modes, codes, and processes in the new context. From their social and cultural background, they individually combine the values and social practices from the local culture with elements and forms they have acquired in the new circumstance, which they consider as meaningful, and create for themselves a resource in living with the new social context. Just what ever makes sense to them in that situation. In the group (of the same locale) they share this experience of developing ways to come up with life. James Lull calls the ‘product’ in this communicative cultural process as *superculture*. He defines it as, “Supercultures are customized clusters, grids, and networks of personal relevance – intricate cultural multiplexes that promote self-understanding, belonging, and identity while they grant opportunities for personal growth, pleasure, and social influence.”<sup>3</sup>

In this complex situation of social communication, religion faces many problems too. Religious values, patterns, perceptions, and norms are no more received as all-embracing reality. What religion proffers for guiding a life is now considered only as one of many ways of life which people experience. Many traditional religious symbolic forms and expressions seem to lose their power. People of modern time undergo other life styles, encounter other symbolic forms, look for other ritualistic events, and have other rhythms of life and world views. But there is also a chance when religious communities consider that one of their fundamental tasks is to accompany human persons in their lives, and to help them discover the meaning of life. Even if there are many layers of meaning in conception of life today, religion assists them to find the meaning of “meanings”, and in this way to see the life in a full coherency. In other words, religion proffers ‘another version’ of life from which people can see their true identity. To be able

<sup>3</sup> Lull, James ed., *Culture in the Communication Age*, 132.

to perform this task, a religious community has to grasp the relation between religion and communication: the context in which religion and social communication interrelate to each other, precisely “in which context of social communication is religion situated?”, and “what for consequences does this situation create for religious communication?”, the way religion uses to approach human beings in the context of human social communication, and the goal of religious communication.

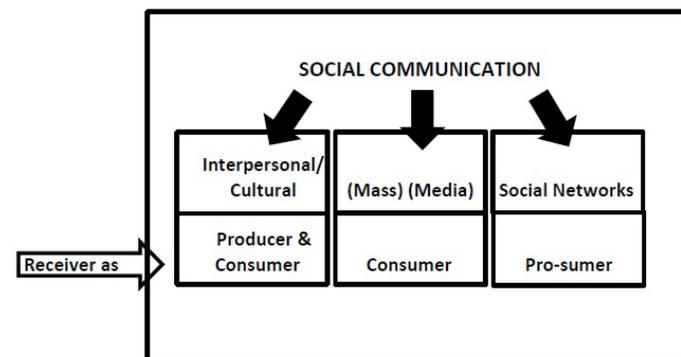
#### 4. Challenge in Correlation of Connectivity and Community

One should be aware of an important factor that in the course of modernization and globalization national culture doesn't exist anymore. In the same condition, local cultures no longer exist in the perspective of cultural life and activities of different communities in the Vietnamese society. Even in remote areas people are connected with the ‘distant’ world. Especially the young generation who is computer-mediated comes in touch with other values, norms, and expectations. The common framework of customs, ways of communicating, tools, and lifestyle are no longer shared by the whole community. People still live together in the same place, but they are divided into different groups according to their social relationships and cultural connectivity. Among the young people, virtual online communities emerge through Internet-facilitated social networks. People living far from each other are now connected online, exchanging information, sharing interests and hobbies, studying together, etc. In this situation religious communities are challenged how to maintain the community as such in which different groups of people can live harmoniously together. In order to give people a sense of belonging to the community many aspects should be considered: for example how to celebrate religious rituals, how to integrate experiences of people into religious celebration, how to filter out negative influences on social life and cultural life of the people, and how to integrate new values, norms, forms, etc. into the existing system so that it can become an enrichment. Religious values, for example those speak for “commonness”, “human dignity”, “harmony”, “solidarity”, “authenticity”, “respect”, “tolerance”, etc., may be used as catalysts in this changing process. This is also a question of the goal

of religious communication at what it wants to aim and especially how it considers the human person in the process of social communication.

#### 5. Challenge in Forms of Communicating

Religion, as the source of interpretation of life, delivers a set of ideas, images, symbols, stories, and theories. By doing this religion aims at explaining and at illustrating what life is about, what the meaning of life is, and in this way it provides guidance in how to live life. However, in contemporary multi-cultural and multi-religious society many beliefs and visions are disseminated. Particularly, modern means of social communication accelerate the spreading of those beliefs and values. Communications of religious values happen in the former time through traditional means such as oral culture, text-culture, religious celebrations and activities mostly on the interpersonal level. In Christian perspective, it is important to note that communicating religious values occurs often in one-way communication. Franz-Josef Eilers illustrates the situation in the following graphic:<sup>4</sup>



Through modern means of social communication, a variety of styles and variants in symbolic exchange is brought about. In mass communications like books, magazines, newspapers, radio, television, etc. people now are somehow ‘passive.’ They receive pictures, images for examples from television, as it transmits to them and often have

<sup>4</sup> Eilers, Franz-Josef (2013). Inter Mirifica: Vatican II Decree on Social Communication 50 Years, Origin – Reception – Challenges. *Religion and Social Communication*. 11, (1). 71.

identified all these as ‘reality’ itself. “Television images, unlike high art, are public, shared symbols. For many people they answer the questions ‘Who am I?’ and ‘Who are we?’ Moreover, under this giant canopy of images all denominations and religious traditions are exposed to the same framing of reality.”<sup>5</sup> It is also important to note that because of this bewildered situation people tend to individually choose what is more easily fitting to them in order to create an individual concept of life.

The situation in modern social networks is different. People now actively participate in a new form of social exchange enabled by the Internet. From their cultural and social setting from the past people now face new forms, orders, customs, norms and values which they have gained in encounter with other different individuals and groups. In this interaction they come to know new forms of communicating and symbolic exchange. From different cultural spheres<sup>6</sup> such as universal values, religions, international sources, civilizations, nations, regions, and everyday life, they create new symbols and concepts, and at the same time new culture among themselves. According to Eilers (2013), the persons who are involved in modern social networks are now pro-sumers.<sup>7</sup> They use cultural elements of modern communications, affected by them and create from there “new culture.”

## 6. Challenge in the Choice of People in Different View Points

People in modern societies are confronted with problems like short-term jobs, changing partners and families, mobility, anonymous neighbors, and throwing away material goods. In addition, societies feature distraction, sensations, promises of pleasures, happiness, or success, etc. In this context different lifestyles are offered, different trends are shown. All these aspects challenge modern human beings in their search for an integral life; they even make them confused in

<sup>5</sup> McDonnell, James and Trampiets, Frances eds. (1989), *Communication Faith in a Technological Age*, Middlegreen, England: St. Paul Publications, 58.

<sup>6</sup> Lull, James. ed., *Culture in the Communication Age*, 139.

<sup>7</sup> Eilers, Franz-Josef. (2013). *Inter Mirifica: Vatican II Decree on Social Communication 50 Years, Origin – Reception – Challenges. Religion and Social Communication*. 11, (1). 72.

seeking for a real meaning of their life. Because of that individual persons feel it difficult to make a right choice. Reality is complex, the perception is fragmented and therefore the approach is pragmatic, individually selective.

One major task that religion has to do in contemporary society is to provide ways through which individuals may regain a sense of self in order to return to their center and experience the core of their personhood. In this way religion assists individuals in interpreting the meaning of their lives, giving criteria for reflecting life experiences and events in the wholeness of the human person. In this perspective religious community is now faced with a multi-dimensional task:

1. Religion or religious community still has to prove itself as a resource which provides guidelines and directions for people in conducting their individual life based on their values.
2. For this reason, religion has to deepen anew those values regarding new social communication in order to re-formulate them in the new context. This needs proper perception and analysis of new forms of social structures and communications.
3. From there, religious community accompanies people in their life with the variety of their experiences. It has to be there in their problems, experiences, and aspirations. It helps them to see the Reality beyond realities.
4. Finally, religion when authentically and prudently assisting people in finding the meaning of life contributes also to develop meaningful ways of social communication that promote human life, human person and the whole of society.

## 7. Some Considerations

All efforts made in Vietnam now are concentrated on economic growth; also foreign countries consider their support programs for Vietnam under economic perspective, although they call those supports as contributions to ‘social development’. Their programs mainly aim at training and educating people in order to provide them the skills

fitting to new technological demands. In the context of the Vietnamese society, it is urgent to look at the imbalance of social and cultural ecology caused by the progress of industrialization and urbanization. Religious communities find themselves in the task of how to keep the community alive.. In this perspective, the question is how to re-structure, re-organize the communities in order to preserve the cultural and religious goods. Maybe, a fusion of different groups to a new unity is necessary so that organization of community life and activities may be possible and easier. However, there is a need to study seriously the cultural, social, and religious tradition of those locals in order to gain an entire picture of the locality. For example, one has to look for the ‘resource persons’ of those locals, who still live there, in order to collect elements of their heritage to analyze and re-evaluate in order preserve that cultural heritage. People concerned should be made aware of their situation and be invited to dialogue how to build a possible way to cope with the situation. Further, various religious activities like before may not be performed because of the lack of personnel and participants, but one can pointedly organize some activities locally, and other joint programs for the whole region. There can be a chance of mutual learning and enriching.

In the new context of social communication, religious community needs people who are aware of their identity shaped by their belief, values, and way of life. At the same time these people should be able to understand the language, symbolic expressions, trends of modern society whether they are valuable or ephemeral. In this way, they understand how people think, express themselves, and act. On this level they can approach them in order to share their view, values, their interpretation of the events, and their experience how they deal with the things.

One experience I would like to share here. We accompany groups of young people who have gone to modern cities for jobs or for study. There we see a chance coming out from initiatives of those young people. They organize themselves to a group in order to strengthen themselves, and to preserve their identity. They establish a website

through which they share with each other how they understand their ‘culture’ and also new experience how they see them in relation to their cultural perspective, and how they now try to come up with this situation. In this way, they introduce other people to their ‘culture’, and bring also new perspective. We help them to filter out positive and negative aspects. In the encounter with young people in the new place, they sometimes celebrate festivities and perform some dances, dramas, and the like which they have learned at home. When they come home to visit during the holidays, they combine social actions like helping the poor, cutting hair of poor children, giving school materials to them, etc. with performance of dances, mime, play, etc. Some of the elements reflex the life situation of their new place, but conceals communications of religious values. Such activities and groups are still in small numbers because the government restricts those activities. However, as I see it there is a need to establish and promote those people and their works. Based on that we may develop some programs and concepts that can promote communications in cultural and religious perspective. It is necessary to note here that each group of persons needs another care and way of accompanying according to the social, cultural and psychological setting of the group. In our complex situation of social communication, we need different small groups of different people who are involved in different life situation. These groups, provided with proper formation and accompaniment, will particularly contribute to communicating religious values in the midst of multi-cultural and multi-religious modern society.

Based on my observation, there is another important aspect. The choice of the language for a communication in its context is also important. The language used in digital communication is often short, precise, and somehow reflects the daily life experiences of the people. I read many stories which are shared among people in Facebook. These stories are very short, telling events in daily life which happen in families, in the school, at the workplace, in nursing homes, and so forth that give experience of humanity, loyalty, trust, friendship, love, etc. People “like” those stories much. Maybe, I think, those stories are a kind of modern parable. I tried to write some stories in the similar way

and shared to my Facebook friends. I have realized that these people are very touched by reading them. They have given many positive feedbacks. In communicating religious values, I believe that we need to do research in this area: the language in the Net, the perception of the people, the symbols used, and the like. In this way we can come to know their expressions, their way of thinking, their language, in order to be able to interpret their message and to understand its meaning. After this we can share our interpretation of that message in the light of religious values. Maybe, on this avenue we come to the joint meaning that leads to understand the full meaning of what religion aims at giving. In other words, authenticity, openness, and sensibility are key terms in religious communications: being authentic to one's belief, being open to people, and being sensible to them (both include humility and respect) will help us in communicating our values to other people. This calls for building up an inner disposition we need in communications. At the same time, religious communicators should develop communication competence in dealing with all the requirements for communicative exchange in modern social communication. For this reason, there is a need to build a new concept in formation of religious communicators since they will be involved in a multi-faceted task.

As I traveled to Vietnam and spent two whole days only to visit several bookstores in Sai Gon and wanted to look for books on sociological or social studies or studies on culture in Vietnam. There are great bookstores and offer different kinds of books. However, it was hard for me to find some books for my concerns. There seems to be no literature about sociological or social studies at present in Vietnam. I only found one or two books dealing with the fundamentals of sociology for new entrant students at universities. Admittedly, there are some books on cultures in the Vietnamese society, but they mainly deal with the introduction to fairs or folk festivals in several locations. Those books are rather descriptive opus than analytical and critical studies. I found some articles in newspapers or magazines. These items have similarly descriptive character. It seems there are at recent time less researches dealing with cultures and society in the Vietnamese context.

My presentation comes therefore not from any statistical or research-based resources, but from my observation of the situation of the places which I passed through and from conversations with people I met. However, the issues in this reflection are compared with some aspects taken from official reports from Vietnam as well as from the reports of some countries that cooperate with Vietnam in economic and social development. The main issues of those reports are about how to build technological and organizational infrastructures<sup>8</sup> or how to improve educational systems in order to cope with the problems and challenges in the development process.<sup>9</sup> However, one can observe the connection between economic development and social change in Vietnamese society.

This indicates that it is urgent to initiate serious studies on social and cultural situation in the Vietnamese context. This cannot be an effort of individual persons, but rather an undertaking of a group that apprehend the problems and facts, analyze and consider them in an interdisciplinary perspective in order to develop a clear vision.

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<sup>8</sup> Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, Unit for Development Communication, *Country Strategy for Development Cooperation with Vietnam 2013-2016*, 7-9.

<sup>9</sup> Nguyen, Loc, “*International and National Skills Development Approaches in Vietnam*,” presentation paper at NORRAG’s conference on June 25-26, 2009. (NORRAG = Network for international policies and cooperation in education and training), retrieved in: <http://www.norrag.org/en/publications/other-publications.html>