

RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION IN VIETNAM, A DIALECTICAL AND HISTORICAL MATERIALIST ANALYSIS THROUGH BUDDHISM AND CATHOLICISM

[COMUNICAÇÃO RELIGIOSA NO VIETNÃ, ANÁLISE MATERIALISTA HISTÓRICO-DIALÉTICA
ATRÁVES DO BUDISMO E DO CATOLICISMO]

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ABSTRACT: Since 1990, alongside Vietnam's comprehensive renovation, religious life in Vietnam has undergone profound transformations in terms of scale, forms of religious practice, and relations with the State. In this context, religious communication has emerged as an important component of religious affairs, serving as an intermediary mechanism for transmitting the religious policies and laws of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the Vietnamese State to religious communities and clergy, while simultaneously reflecting the needs, aspirations, and dynamics of religious life within society. This article analyzes religious communication in Vietnam from 1990 to the present through an examination of two representative cases: Buddhism and Catholicism. By applying the methodological framework of dialectical materialism and historical materialism, the article elucidates the relationship between religious conditions, religious policy, and communication practices; evaluates the current situation, achievements, and challenges of religious communication conducted under the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam; and proposes several theoretical and practical implications for enhancing the quality and effectiveness of religious communication in the context of globalization and the rapid development of digital media.

KEYWORDS: Religious communication; religious policy; Buddhism; Catholicism; dialectical materialism; historical materialism; Vietnam.

RESUMO: Desde 1990, paralelamente à abrangente renovação do Vietnã, a vida religiosa no país passou por profundas transformações em termos de escala, formas de prática religiosa e relações com o Estado. Nesse contexto, a comunicação religiosa emergiu como uma parte importante dos assuntos religiosos, servindo como um mecanismo intermediário para a transmissão das políticas e leis religiosas do Partido Comunista do Vietnã e do Estado vietnamita às comunidades religiosas e ao clero, ao mesmo tempo em que reflete as necessidades, as aspirações e a dinâmica da vida religiosa no seio da sociedade. Este artigo analisa a comunicação religiosa no Vietnã de 1990 até o presente através de uma análise de dois casos representativos: o budismo e o catolicismo. Ao aplicar o referencial metodológico do materialismo dialético e do materialismo histórico, o artigo elucida a relação entre as condições religiosas, a política religiosa e as práticas de comunicação; avalia a situação atual, as conquistas e os desafios da comunicação religiosa conduzida sob a liderança do Partido Comunista do Vietnã; e propõe diversas implicações teóricas e práticas para melhorar a qualidade e a eficácia da comunicação religiosa no contexto da globalização e do rápido desenvolvimento das mídias digitais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Comunicação religiosa; política religiosa; budismo; catolicismo; materialismo dialético; materialismo histórico; Vietnã.

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1. INTRODUCTION

232

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Vietnam is a multi-religious country characterized by the coexistence and interweaving of indigenous religions and imported religions, alongside the parallel presence of folk beliefs and organized religions. Throughout the course of history, religion in Vietnam has not merely been a purely spiritual phenomenon but has been closely intertwined with the nation's cultural, social, and historical life. According to data from state management agencies, Vietnam currently has approximately 24 million religious adherents, accounting for nearly 27% of the population, belonging to 13 different religions, with dozens of religious organizations officially recognized by the Vietnamese State as legal entities. In addition, there are tens of thousands of clergy and religious practitioners, as well as an extensive system of places of worship distributed throughout the country. These facts demonstrate that religious life constitutes an integral component of Vietnamese social life, exerting multidimensional influences on cultural, political, social, and ideological spheres (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2002).

A significant turning point in the perception and religious policy of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the Vietnamese State was marked in 1990 with the issuance of Resolution No. 24-NQ/TW by the Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam on strengthening religious affairs in the new situation. Since then, the consistent viewpoint of the Communist Party of Vietnam that religion is a legitimate spiritual need of a segment of the population and will continue to exist alongside the nation has been increasingly institutionalized within the legal and policy framework. The right to freedom of belief and religion, as well as the right not to believe in or practice any religion, has been continuously safeguarded and expanded in both legal terms and social practice. However, given that religion is a sensitive field susceptible to historical, cultural, and political influences, the effective implementation of religious policies depends not only on the content of legal documents but also decisively on communication activities (Do, 2008). Communication, understood as a process of transmission, interpretation, dialogue, and orientation of social perception, plays a particularly important intermediary role in connecting the Vietnamese State and religious communities. Through communication, the viewpoints and religious policies of the Communist Party of Vietnam are transformed into social messages that penetrate the cognitive and behavioral lives of believers, clergy, and the general public. At the same time, communication serves as a channel for reflecting changes in religious life, the needs and aspirations of religious communities, and emerging issues in religious practice, thereby contributing to the adjustment of policies and state management methods in a timely and appropriate manner.

In the context of the strong development of mass media and especially digital media, religious communication is no longer a unilateral, top-down activity but has increasingly become a multidirectional interactive process. Communication actors now include not only the Communist

Party of Vietnam, the Vietnamese State, and official press agencies, but also religious organizations, individual clergy and believers, as well as informal communicators operating in cyberspace. The audience of religious communication has also become more diverse, extending beyond religious communities to encompass society at large and overseas Vietnamese communities. In this context, religious communication plays an important role in shaping public opinion, strengthening national unity, and countering distorted narratives and the exploitation of religious issues for anti-state purposes and social destabilization (Dang, 1998). Nevertheless, practical experience indicates that religious communication in Vietnam still exhibits various limitations. At certain times and across certain media platforms, information on religion has lacked timeliness, comprehensiveness, and sensitivity to the cultural and religious characteristics of specific communities. The workforce engaged in religious communication remains uneven in terms of professional expertise, communication skills, and in-depth understanding of religion. Moreover, state management mechanisms for religious communication have encountered difficulties in adapting to the rapid expansion of new media platforms, particularly social media and transnational communication.

Against this backdrop, conducting a systematic study of religious communication in Vietnam from 1990 to the present is both theoretically and practically necessary. Among the religions operating in Vietnam, Buddhism and Catholicism represent particularly significant cases, not only because of their large numbers of adherents but also due to their long histories, well-structured organizational systems, and relatively developed communication networks. Examining Buddhist and Catholic communication enables a clearer identification of both commonalities and distinctions in religious communication in Vietnam, thereby illuminating key issues confronting religious communication under the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam in the present and future.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. Literature Review

Research on communication in general has established a relatively rich theoretical foundation, encompassing various approaches from communication studies, sociology, political science, and cultural studies. These works conceptualize communication as an interactive social process in which messages, communicators, media, and audiences are organically interconnected and mutually influential. However, when applied to the religious domain, communication studies remain fragmented and have yet to form a coherent theoretical system. At the international level, most studies

of religious communication adopt theological or missionary perspectives, emphasizing the role of communication in disseminating doctrines, strengthening faith, and building religious communities. While these studies provide valuable insights into the internal logic of religious communication, they often rely on idealist assumptions and pay insufficient attention to concrete historical and social conditions and power relations.

In Vietnam, studies on religion and religious policy have addressed the role of propaganda and mass mobilization among believers as important components of religious affairs conducted under the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam. Nonetheless, religious communication has largely been treated as an auxiliary aspect of ideological work rather than as an independent field governed by its own dynamics. Furthermore, existing research on Buddhist and Catholic communication tends to be descriptive, lacking theoretical generalization and interdisciplinary comparison. This gap underscores the need for studies that approach religious communication from a materialist perspective grounded in Vietnam's specific historical and social context since the *Đổi mới* period.

2.2. Research Methodology

This study is conducted on the basis of dialectical materialism and historical materialism. Religion is examined both as a form of social consciousness and as an objective social phenomenon shaped by specific economic, political, cultural, and historical conditions. Religious communication is analyzed as a dialectical social process involving reciprocal interactions among communication actors, content, media, and audiences. In addition, the study employs interdisciplinary methods such as document analysis, historical comparison, and sociological approaches to religion in order to elucidate transformations in Buddhist and Catholic communication in relation to the religious policies of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the Vietnamese State since 1990.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS

3.1. Marxist Philosophical Perspectives on Religion

The Marxist philosophical perspective on religion is grounded in dialectical materialism and historical materialism, marking a fundamental shift from idealist and metaphysical approaches to the interpretation of religion (Puspita, 2022). Rather than conceiving religion as an autonomous supernatural entity or a purely spiritual phenomenon detached from material reality, Marxism understands religion as a socio-historical phenomenon

that arises from concrete material conditions of human existence. From this standpoint, religion is neither an eternal attribute of human nature nor a timeless metaphysical truth, but a product of specific historical circumstances in which human beings have not yet achieved mastery over nature and their own social relations. According to Karl Marx, religion constitutes a form of social consciousness that reflects objective reality in an indirect, illusory, and inverted manner (Harrison, 2024). In social contexts, particularly class-divided societies, economic and social forces created by human beings but operating beyond their control tend to appear in consciousness as external, supernatural powers. These forces are personified, sacralized, and endowed with divine authority, thereby giving rise to religious beliefs and institutions. Consequently, Marxist philosophy insists that understanding religion requires an analysis of the real social conditions that generate it, rather than an exclusive focus on doctrines, rituals, or theological systems (Emeka, 2024).

Marx's well-known statement that religion is "the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions" has often been interpreted simplistically as a wholesale rejection of religion. In fact, this formulation expresses a profoundly dialectical and humanistic understanding. Religion is simultaneously an expression of real suffering and a form of spiritual protest against that suffering. It provides consolation and meaning to individuals confronted with oppression, alienation, and powerlessness, while at the same time revealing, albeit in an illusory form, the contradictions and injustices embedded in social reality. From this perspective, religion cannot be criticized in isolation from the social conditions that compel individuals to seek solace in religious belief (Horii, 2017). On this basis, Marxist philosophy exposes the limitations of purely ideological or abstract critiques of religion. Marx argued that merely denying religious belief or promoting atheism at the level of consciousness is insufficient to eliminate religion from social life. Religion can only diminish when the material and social conditions that produce it, such as exploitation, inequality, alienated labor, and social insecurity, are fundamentally transformed. Thus, Marxist critique of religion does not aim at the direct eradication of religion itself, but at the emancipation of human beings from alienated social relations that give rise to religious needs (Toscano, 2010).

Friedrich Engels further developed this approach by situating religion firmly within historical processes and socio-economic formations. Engels emphasized that every religion bears the imprint of the historical epoch and social classes from which it emerged and that religious forms evolve in response to changes in economic structures and social relations (Clarke and Byrne, 1993). Religion, therefore, is neither supra-historical nor static; it is an integral component of social history, subject to the same objective laws of development as other forms of social consciousness. This perspective avoids both the absolutization of religion as a transhistorical force and its reduction to mere superstition. Vladimir I. Lenin subsequently applied Marxist insights on religion to revolutionary practice and socialist construction. Lenin stressed that religion is a deeply rooted social phenomenon that cannot be abolished

through administrative coercion or ideological repression. The struggle against religion must be linked to the improvement of material living conditions, the expansion of education, and the development of science and culture. These ideas have profoundly influenced the approach of the Communist Party of Vietnam to religious issues, emphasizing respect for freedom of belief alongside long-term social transformation (Khazanov, 2008).

3.2. Historical and Social Context of the Formation of Religious Communication in Vietnam since 1990

The emergence and development of religious communication in Vietnam since 1990 must be understood within the broader historical and social context of the *Đổi mới* period. This era has been characterized by a profound transformation of Vietnam's socio-economic model, marked by the transition from a centrally planned economy to a socialist-oriented market economy, as well as deepening international integration. These structural changes have exerted significant influence on religious life, increasing both the visibility of religion in public space and the demand for communication between the State, religious organizations, and society. Prior to 1990, communication related to religion was largely administrative and propagandistic in nature, focusing on disseminating state viewpoints and countering phenomena perceived as negative or destabilizing. Following the adoption of Resolution No. 24-NQ/TW by the Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam, perceptions of religion and religious affairs underwent a fundamental shift. Religion came to be recognized as a legitimate spiritual need of a segment of the population and as a phenomenon that would persist over the long term. This change necessitated a corresponding transformation in communication practices, from one-directional transmission to persuasion, dialogue, and orientation.

Within this context, religious communication gradually emerged as a relatively distinct field linked to the expansion of mass media. Central and local press agencies increasingly covered religious life, reported on lawful religious activities, disseminated information on religious legislation, and countered misinformation. Through these processes, religious communication contributed to shaping a more balanced and objective social understanding of religion. The rapid development of information and communication technologies in the early twenty-first century further transformed the landscape of religious communication. The Internet, social media, and digital platforms removed traditional spatial and temporal constraints, enabling religious organizations and individual believers to participate directly in the production and circulation of religious content. While this diversification enriched religious communication, it also introduced new complexities and challenges in terms of management, regulation, and content quality. From a historical materialist perspective, religious communication in Vietnam since 1990 cannot be attributed solely to subjective intentions or policy

decisions. Rather, it reflects the combined impact of economic development, rising educational levels, and expanding social interaction. Religious communication thus functions both as a reflection of changing religious life and as an active force shaping social attitudes toward religion.

3.3. The Current Situation and Characteristics of Buddhist Communication in the Renovation Period

Buddhism is the largest religion in Vietnam in terms of adherents and has long been deeply embedded in the nation's historical and cultural development. During the renovation period, Buddhist communication has expanded significantly, demonstrating Buddhism's adaptation to contemporary social conditions. One notable feature of Buddhist communication is its diversity of forms. In addition to traditional media such as printed journals, religious publications, and internal bulletins, Buddhist communication has extended into broadcasting, television, and particularly digital media. Websites, online video channels, and Buddhist social media platforms have proliferated, facilitating the dissemination of Buddhist teachings and ethical messages to a broad audience. In terms of content, Buddhist communication extends beyond doctrinal instruction and ritual practice to address social issues such as moral education, environmental protection, charitable activities, and humanitarian engagement. This expansion reflects Buddhism's active participation in contemporary social life and its use of communication as a means of asserting social relevance.

However, the study also reveals persistent limitations. Buddhist communication remains fragmented and lacks unified coordination and long-term strategic planning. The participation of numerous individuals and institutions with varying levels of expertise has resulted in uneven content quality. In some cases, communication relies heavily on emotional appeal and lacks analytical depth, limiting its effectiveness within modern mass communication environments. From a dialectical materialist perspective, Buddhist communication embodies tensions between tradition and modernity. While preserving core religious values, it must adapt to media logics that prioritize speed, attractiveness, and interactivity. Resolving this contradiction remains a central challenge for Buddhist communication in Vietnam today.

3.4. The Current Situation and Characteristics of Catholic Communication in the Context of Integration

Catholic communication in Vietnam has developed under the dual influence of the global Catholic communication tradition and Vietnam's specific historical, social, and legal conditions. This combination has produced distinctive characteristics. A defining feature of Catholic communication is its high degree of organization and discipline. Communication activities

are typically structured through diocesan and parish systems, with clear orientation regarding objectives and content. Catholic publications, diocesan bulletins, official websites, and community-based media networks play a crucial role in maintaining religious life and transmitting doctrinal messages. Catholic communication focuses primarily on doctrine, pastoral activities, and community life, while also addressing social issues such as family values, education, social justice, and charitable work from a Christian ethical perspective. Through these activities, Catholicism positions itself as a moral and social actor contributing to the broader community. Nevertheless, Catholic communication also faces limitations. While organizational discipline ensures message consistency, it can reduce flexibility and limit engagement with wider audiences. In some cases, communication remains inward-looking, directed primarily at believers rather than society at large. From a historical materialist standpoint, Catholic communication in Vietnam reflects the interaction between the universal character of Catholicism and Vietnam's specific socio-historical context. Its evolution demonstrates efforts to reconcile religious identity with the demands of integration and the realities of Vietnamese social and political life.

4. DISCUSSION

The research findings demonstrate that religious communication in Vietnam since 1990 cannot be understood merely as a technical activity of information transmission. Rather, it constitutes a complex social process reflecting dialectical relationships among religion, the Vietnamese State, and society under the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam in the context of renovation and international integration. From the perspective of dialectical materialism, religious communication operates through the unity and struggle of opposites, including regulation and freedom, orientation and diversity, and religious tradition and the logic of modern media.

On the one hand, religious communication serves as an important instrument for the Communist Party of Vietnam and the Vietnamese State to implement religious policies, disseminate legal frameworks, stabilize social consciousness, strengthen national unity, and ensure political and social stability. Through official communication channels, the State seeks to shape public understanding of religion in accordance with principles of respect for freedom of belief, equality among religions, and the rule of law. In this sense, religious communication plays a regulatory and integrative role, contributing to the maintenance of social order and cohesion in a multi-religious society. On the other hand, religious organizations themselves, particularly Buddhism and Catholicism, actively employ communication as a means of affirming religious identity, sustaining spiritual life, and expanding social influence. Communication allows these religious communities to articulate their moral values, engage with social issues, and interact with broader segments of society. These two dimensions of religious communication are not separate or

mutually exclusive; rather, they are interwoven and sometimes contradictory, giving rise to tensions that require careful management and dialogue.

The case of Buddhist communication illustrates a prominent contradiction between the preservation of tradition and the pressures of modernization. While Buddhist communication has expanded rapidly in terms of media platforms and audience reach, especially in digital environments, this quantitative growth has not always been accompanied by corresponding qualitative development. In many instances, content remains fragmented, emotionally driven, or lacking analytical depth. This reflects a broader pattern in contemporary religious communication: as technological barriers to communication decrease, the central issue shifts from access to communication toward the quality, responsibility, and social impact of communication practices. Without coherent orientation and professional standards, religious communication risks superficiality or the commodification of religious values.

Catholic communication, by contrast, demonstrates the advantages of organizational coherence and disciplinary structure. These characteristics contribute to consistency in messaging and reduce the likelihood of distortion. However, they also introduce certain limitations. In a media environment that increasingly values interaction, plurality, and public dialogue, communication that remains largely inward-facing may restrict engagement with wider society. This tension reflects a dialectical contradiction between the universal aspirations of religious messages and the particular socio-cultural contexts in which they are communicated. From a historical materialist perspective, the evolution of religious communication in Vietnam is inseparable from transformations in the economic base and the development of productive forces, especially information and communication technologies. Rising educational levels, expanding access to digital media, and growing demands for participation in public discourse have reshaped the conditions under which religious communication operates. Under these circumstances, unilateral and closed communication models become increasingly ineffective. Both the Communist Party of Vietnam and religious organizations are therefore compelled to adjust their approaches toward more dialogical, adaptive, and socially responsive forms of communication.

Another significant issue emerging from the findings concerns the role of communication actors. The effectiveness of religious communication depends heavily on the competencies, ethical orientation, and social responsibility of those engaged in communication activities. In practice, the shortage of personnel who possess both modern communication skills and deep understanding of religion and religious policy remains a structural challenge. This issue is not merely technical but reflects broader institutional and educational constraints related to training, professional development, and human resource allocation. Overall, the discussion highlights that religious communication in Vietnam stands at a critical juncture. Addressing existing limitations requires not only technological innovation but also theoretical renewal and institutional reform. A materialist and dialectical

understanding of religious communication underscores the necessity of situating communication practices within the broader context of social development, state governance, and cultural transformation. Only through such a comprehensive approach can religious communication fulfill its constructive potential while minimizing social risks in an era of globalization and digital media expansion.

5. CONCLUSION

Religious communication in Vietnam from 1990 to the present represents a historically specific social phenomenon that reflects dialectical relationships among religion, the Vietnamese State, and society under the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam during the period of renovation and international integration. Through an in-depth examination of Buddhism and Catholicism, this study demonstrates that religious communication has played an important role in disseminating religious policies, stabilizing religious life, and strengthening national solidarity in a multi-religious context. At the same time, the research reveals persistent limitations related to content quality, communication methods, and human resources, particularly in the rapidly evolving environment of digital media. These limitations are not accidental but stem from structural contradictions inherent in social transformation and from delays in theoretical and managerial innovation. As religious communication becomes increasingly multidirectional and transnational, traditional approaches to communication and governance face growing challenges.

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