

Perspective of Marxism-leninism on the Similarities and differences between Religion and Socialism

Ha Trong Tha*

Abstract--- *Religion is the result of human creativity. As a form of social consciousness, religion is determined by and reflects social existence. However, religion also has its own active role. By reflecting the society, religion desires for people to be happy and leads people to do good through profound human viewpoint. This article presents the perspective of Marxism-Leninism on the similarities and differences between religion and socialism. On that basis, the author comments on the evolution of religion in the development of human society, especially in the condition of socialism.*

Keywords--- *Religion, Similarities, Differences, Socialism, Humanity.*

I. RATIONALE

In real life, when feeling helpless before nature or the oppression and injustice of society, people always need protection and love to overcome the sufferings in the mortal world. Religion, thus, is born to provide people with toleration, forgiveness and protection, to empower those who are suffering so that they can overcome all difficulties in life. Socialism is a doctrine developed by K.Marx and F.Engels in the 40s of the 19th century. This doctrine was born to help the poor proletariat to fight against the oppression and exploitation of the bourgeoisie. It can be seen that the purpose of both these liberation paths (religion and socialism) is for human happiness. Religion and socialism both have good nature, both represent human morality and both desire to bring happiness to people and direct them to goodness, humanity and beauty; thus, religion and socialism are long-living and are practiced by many people. However, there are still differences between religion and socialism. The correct identification of similarities and differences between religion and socialism is necessary for us to promote similarities and at the same time understand and narrow the gaps between the two, thus for people to be happier - which is also the goal of religion and socialism.

II. SIMILARITIES BETWEEN RELIGION AND SOCIALISM

It can be affirmed that despite happening in different contexts, things and phenomena in the world in a certain angle always share some similarities. So do religion and socialism. Although the concept of religion was formed at the end of the primitive society period, while socialism was mentioned by K.Marx and F.Engels in the 40s of the 19th century, they do share have something in common. The similarities are reflected in the following basic points:

First, the Emergence of Religion as Well as Socialism is a step forward in the history of Human Development

Regarding the nature of religion, in *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, K.Marx said that: "Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real

Ha Trong Tha, PhD, Deputy Head of Office of Political Affairs, Main Lecturer, People's Security University, Vietnam.*

suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions”¹. That observation was made when K.Marx studied the origin of religion, especially Christianity. When the Roman rule was heavily suppressing and exploiting slaves, the earnest desire for emancipation of slaves did not materialize in practice, so it gave way to suffering. What man did not achieve as his heart desires in the mortal world is offset by the toleration of God in the afterlife. In fact, religion plays the role to comfort and alleviate human pains in the real world. Therefore, when human society experiences changes, especially great ones relating to existence, life and death, if the liberation from reality is unsuccessful, it is inevitable that human will turn to religion for salvation of their souls. So it is reasonable to think that: "Religion is a social phenomenon that appears only when human society develops to a certain stage. The early period of human society could not produce religion. From the absence of religion to the birth of religion is a step forward of human society."²

It can be seen that, most religions on earth are more concerned with the spiritual, rather than the material, aspect in the life of human. Although religion appeared at the end of the primitive society period, when human's material life was still humble; however, what it primarily concerns is not material but spiritual life. The spiritual needs are not resolved in the real world but in the afterlife, as K.Marx said: "Therefore, the duty of history, after the afterlife of the truth is lost, is to establish the truth of this world"³ K. Marx's reference to the "afterlife" means the unreality of religion, the "turning away" of religion from real life. Although it "turns away" from the real world, but it's not a reason to think that religion is a step backward. In fact, the formation of religion is a step forward in the history of human, because religion is only formed when the ability of thinking and abstraction of human as well as the production level of mankind reaches a certain level, and comparing to the mythical worldview, the religious worldview is a great leap forward.

Since the society is divided into classes, human has been dreaming of living in a fair society without people exploiting people. Before and now, those who have love for peace of the world have fought tirelessly to realize that dream of thousand years. The emergence of capitalism to replace previous oppressive and exploitative regimes was a leap forward. However, that is still just switching from one oppressive regime to another. Hundreds of years of capitalism's development cannot make up for the injustice and inequality between nations and classes in the society. But since the birth of socialism on the basis of dialectical point of view, its good nature has been able to satisfy the thousand-year wish of human.

In the 20th century, human witnessed great achievements of real socialism which brought the Soviet Union to the position of a superpower in the world. Unfortunately, in the last decades of the previous century, due to many different reasons, the system of socialist countries ceased to exist. However, it was just the fall of a specific socialist model instead of the fall of the entire socialist ideology. The beautiful achievements of the remaining socialist countries, including China and Vietnam, are making many good impressions on the world about the future of socialism, which further proves that socialism is a step forward of mankind.

In summary, the formation of religion as well as the emergence of socialism with their superior features are the steps forward, rather than backward, of mankind. This is better clarified in the ideology of religion and socialism.

Second, Religion and Socialism both Aim to Bring Happiness to Mankind and Work for Social Welfare

Different religions, despite being formed in different historical context, all share the same desire of bringing happiness to human. Meanwhile, socialism with its good nature always desires to fix the “degradation” of human nature, to create a society that can “replace the old capitalist society with classes and class conflict, to create an association in which the freedom of development of each person is the condition for freedom of development of everyone”⁴. So, the most common feature that reflects humanity the most in the ideology of religions and socialism is the desire for happiness of mankind and benefits for the society. Thus, it is possible that the ideal of religions can accompany the ideal of socialism.

The similarities between religion and socialism are clearly demonstrated in many different religions. The proletariat attempts revolution to overthrow the bourgeoisie and build socialism. That's also the will of Jesus when he spoke to the oppressors: "My house is the house of prayer: but you have made it a den of thieves"⁵. The purpose of socialist revolution is for everyone to be fully developed; for each person is met with the need to eat, live, wear and study. In fact, this is similar to the thought of Saint Jacques: "A man or a woman has no clothes or bread. One of you tell them: "Warm yourself up, eat to your belly's content". But you give them nothing, so what's the point in saying that?"⁶ F.Engels saw the similarities between early Christianity and modern socialism. He believed that in both cases, there are movements of the oppressed mass, including those who are wanted and exiled by the government, who disseminate the idea of a liberation from bondage and suffering. Because of such similarities, in *On the History of Early Christianity*, F.Engels wrote: "The history of early Christianity has notable points of resemblance with the modern working-class movement. Like the latter, Christianity was originally a movement of oppressed people: it first appeared as the religion of slaves and emancipated slaves, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome. Both Christianity and the workers' socialism preach forthcoming salvation from bondage and misery"⁷. The classics of Marxism-Leninism admit that: "In the history of early Christianity, there are notable points of resemblance with the modern working-class movement. Both Christianity and the workers' socialism preach a future salvation from bondage and misery."⁸.

Ho Chi Minh (*who was honored by UNESCO as Hero of national liberation and Great man of culture of Vietnam*) was a communist. Ho Chi Minh followed Marxism-Leninism, but he also did not hesitate to express his admiration for the founders of religions. He pointed out the reason why great people founding religions are admired by later generations: their beautiful ideal. Ho Chi Minh emphasized the most fundamental similarity between religions and Marxism (whose nature refers to socialism) after generalizing the basic characteristics of these doctrines: all are for the benefits of people. Researchers who study Ho Chi Minh often quote the following from *Ho Chi Minh story* by Truong Niem Thuc (Tam Lien Publishing House, Shanghai, 1949) to prove his evaluation of this issue:

"Confucianism encourages individual ethical cultivation.

Christianity promotes the merit of great kindness.

Marxism positions itself with dialectical working method.

Sun Yat-sen's doctrine includes policies that are suitable to our country's conditions.

Confucius, Jesus, Marx, Sun Yat-sen all share one thing in common. They all want to seek happiness for mankind and welfare for society. If they were still alive and gathered together, I believe that they would definitely get along well with each other like close friends. I am trying to be their little student."⁹

Because the lofty ideal of liberating human from oppression and misery of socialism is similar to that of religions, Ho Chi Minh raised the flag of "National independence and socialism" to gather people for the fight against the invading empire. This met the expectations of Vietnamese people; therefore, Ho Chi Minh led the revolution of Vietnamese people - both religious and non-religious ones - to liberate the nation and bring freedom and happiness to people. This is also the desire of founders of religions. Ho Chi Minh wrote: "The Buddha has great compassion. To save sentient beings from suffering, he must sacrifice and fight against evil spirits. Now, our people are united and accept to make sacrifice, to see through the end of the resistance war in order to defeat the reactionary colonialists, to save the nation from tribulation and to preserve the independence and unity of the Fatherland. That's us following the example of great compassion of Buddha, we start the resistance war to free our people from the bondage of slavery."¹⁰

For Catholics, in the *Letter to Vietnamese priests and Catholics* (25/12/1945), Ho Chi Minh wrote: "One thousand, nine hundred and forty five years ago, on this day, Jesus - a great man - was born. He spent all his life sacrificing and striving for freedom and democracy. It's been nearly 2,000 years since his birth, yet his cordial spirit hasn't faded, but rather precipitated and penetrated deep into society. Now, everyone in our country, whether Catholics or not, is united in solidarity and unanimity as children of the same family, striving to protect the independence of the Fatherland! On the battlefield, the blood and bones of Catholic and non-Catholic soldiers has formed a great fortified wall to stop the common enemy: the Western colonizers. Across the country, Catholic and non-Catholic patriots are giving their all to the resistance war and national construction! To have that spirit of sacrifice and striving means you are following the noble example of Jesus."¹¹

With similarities between the ideals of religions and socialism, many followers of religions in Vietnam joined hand with other citizens to chase out the French and the US colonial empires to bring independence, freedom and happiness to the people of Vietnam. Vietnam's victory over the US invaders was of great significance, affirming the preeminent power of socialism before imperial capitalism; the unrivaled power of revolutionary heroism before the most aggressive invaders; the vitality of the flag of peace, national independence, democracy and social progress. On November 12, 2013, President of the Russian Federation V. Putin came to Hanoi in an official visit to Vietnam. He visited the house of President Ho Chi Minh and wrote in the memorial book as follows: "Humanity has entered the 21st century, an era of peace, progress and prosperity. However, Ho Chi Minh's moral and ideological values are still the torch that lights the way, a symbol of a future culture... Therefore, history forever remembers him as a saint." Thus, it can be said that both K.Marx - the founder of the doctrine of socialism, and Ho Chi Minh - his student, expressed the clear ideal of socialism, which is liberating human, for the happiness of human beings and human society. With that in mind, it is no coincidence that President V. Putin considered Ho Chi Minh "a saint". This word is often used to honor the great contributions of great people in religions, despite the fact that Ho Chi Minh was not a follower of any. This also further affirms the similarity between religion and socialism - both aim to bring happiness to people and benefits to the society.

Third, Humanity is a Common Characteristic Shared by Religion and Socialism

In the world today there are many different religions; among which are three major ones: Christianity, Buddhism and Islam, with billions of followers. All religions revolve around kindness, compassion, delight, renunciation, charity and orient people to Truth, Goodness and Beauty. That's humanitarianism in religions. This spirit is clearly expressed in religions, especially those with a large number of followers. Christianity requires believers to be respectful to their parents; to not kill people; to not commit adultery; to not be greedy; to not lie; to not desire wealth in a wrong way; to not desire other's wife or husband. Buddhism requires Buddhists to have faith in Buddha, to keep themselves from violating the five precepts of not killing living beings, not stealing, not having sexual misconduct, not lying and not having intoxication. Meanwhile, Islam requires its followers to protect the truth, to fight against what's wrong, to practice healthy acts and stay away from evil deeds, to be kind to their family and care for their neighbors, to respect the elderly and love children, to take care of the sick and feel compassion for the vulnerable, to encourage those who are dismayed, to be happy for those who are gifted and to be persevere with those who are going down the wrong way.¹² Such behaviors of religions resemble the revolutionary morality of socialism mentioned by K.Marx, F.Engels and V.I.Lenin. This proves that humanity is also a similarity between religion and socialism. Because of that, V.I.Lenin also expressed his disagreement with left-wing anarchists who want to deny the existence of religion in socialism and their harsh acts. He said: "For us, the unity in a truly revolutionary struggle of the oppressed class to create a heaven on earth is more important than the unanimous opinion of the proletarians about heaven on earth."¹³ What the communists need to have and be responsible for is: "Unite them for the real struggle to win a better life on earth."¹⁴

The humanity in religions is also confirmed by Ho Chi Minh from the very struggle of Vietnamese people led by him. In the common struggle of Vietnamese people, there was the great contribution of those who practice different religions to achieve the ultimate goal: independence for the nation; freedom and happiness for the people. He emphasized the human aspects of religious ethics in the original doctrine to appeal to people of all faiths and religions towards a common goal.

"Jesus said: Ethics is charity.

Buddha said: Ethics is compassion.

Confucius said: Ethics is kindness and uprightness."¹⁵

Fidel Castro once said: "We can agree with the Lord's commandments, because they are very similar to our guidelines. If the church tells us "don't steal", then one of our revolutionary characteristics is to eliminate thefts, embezzlement and bribery. If the church says: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself", that's also what we encourage. If the church teaches "Don't lie", lying is also what we condemn the most. When the church promotes the spirit of sacrifice, austerity and humility, we do the same. We assert the duties of revolution as ready to sacrifice, ready to bear with austerity, and honest."¹⁶ Fidel Castro asserted: "The coincidences between Christianity and communism are ten thousand times more than those between Christianity and capitalism."¹⁷ It can be said that religious moral values are not strange to the moral qualities of socialism raised by the communists. Because those ethical standards are of human nature, not defined by theistic or atheistic views, so the intersection between religion and socialism is only natural.

It can be seen that no religions encourage believers to do evil, but on the contrary, religions advise people to do good, to suppress their material desire so as not to fall into the path of sin. Thus, tolerance is a common attribute of religions and also human, because right in the earliest form of social organization - primitive communism - human knew how to be tolerant of their fellows to consolidate and maintain the existence and development of community. Along with the development of human society, ancient Eastern countries which are rich in humane traditions also affirmed that conduct, something that has become the value of many peoples in the East today, including those that are building socialism. It is not difficult to find that value in ancient Western countries. Socrates once advised people to look at themselves and be tolerant of others and their fellow human beings. And now, although Western countries are in the process of developing capitalism, many of them, especially developed ones, are showing very humane aspects in community behavior. That's the characteristic of socialism which capitalist countries are having. It can be said that the superiority of human ethics in religions is not too different from the humanitarianism of socialism, which many countries in the world are building for their people.

III. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN RELIGION AND SOCIALISM

Besides the similarities between religion and socialism, there are differences between them. During their time, K.Marx and F.Engels pointed out the basic difference between these two doctrines. K.Marx and F.Engels considered religion to be an inverted worldview. They said: "This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in popular form (...) and its universal basis of consolation and justification"¹⁸. In *Critique of the Gotha Program*, K.Marx further analyzed: "Bourgeois "freedom of conscience" is nothing but the toleration of all possible kinds of religious freedom of conscience from the witchery of religion"¹⁹. F.Engels argued that the basic difference between Christianity and socialism was that: Christians directs the liberation of people in the "other" world, while representatives of socialism advocate liberating people from bondage in the real world. Therefore, F. Engels advocated replacing Christian morality with communist morality. In addition, F.Engels also affirmed that despite several resemblances in concepts of humanity, communism and Christianity basically have different worldviews: "Even if the Bible can explain some paragraphs in a favorable manner for communism, the entire spirit of the Bible is still completely on the opposite of communism"²⁰.

In general, Marxism-Leninism sees religions from the standpoint of radical materialism and atheism. Marxism-Leninism is humanitarianism, advocating the liberation of mankind from all oppression and social injustice in real life, while religions look forward to the afterlife. In addition, the concept of K.Marx and F. Engels on religion was not built on the basis of comprehensive studies of religion in general, especially Eastern religion. They mainly relied on assessment of Christianity. They studied religions in association with the practice of class struggle in contemporary Europe to directly serve revolutionary requirements of the proletariat. Due to the situation at that time, they had to talk a lot about the negative side of religion and did not have the conditions to study deeply into the cultural, psychological, emotional and ethical aspects of religions. However, it must be noted that the founders of Marxism-Leninism also paid attention to the fact that religion is needed by a part of the people, that it is the need of social development in certain historical periods. F. Engels wrote: "Religion is created by human, who feel the need

for religion for themselves as well as the same need of the masses”²¹. Therefore, the assessment of K.Marx and F.Engels about the differences between religion and socialism is also understandable. In 1923, Nguyen Ai Quoc (Ho Chi Minh) said: "In the European way of thinking, the people of Annam have no priests and no religions."²² Because in his opinion, "Marxism is built on the basis of European history, but Europe is not all humankind". This argument of Nguyen Ai Quoc is currently a guideline for policies on religion of the Communist Party and the State to realize the goal of "building a rich people, a strong country, an equal, democratic and civilized society." Therefore, in general, it can be asserted that the fundamental difference between religion and socialism is in terms of worldview. If religion has an idealistic worldview, which affirms the existence of gods, materialism on the other hand is based on materialistic worldview and does not recognize the existence of the divine. If religion establishes its beliefs based on the creator without regard to reality and directs the cause of liberation for people in the "other" world, socialist's beliefs are based on science with the desire to eliminate classes, oppression and exploitation to build a heaven on earth for everyone.

IV. DEVELOPMENT OF RELIGIOUS SITUATION UNDER SOCIALISM

Religion is a historical category, so there may come a time as predicted by F.Engels: "As long as people not only devise, but also succeed in doing something, only then, the last unknown power that still reflects in religion will be lost, and along with it the religious reflection, because then there will be nothing more to reflect (...) until religion dies its natural death"²³. Although F.Engels did not think religion will last forever, he also did not think that it would soon disappear. He explained it as follows: "We see that religion, once formed, always contains a traditional material, as in all areas of thought, tradition is a *large conservative force*. But the changes that occur in that material all arise from class relations, thus from the economic relations among the people who cause those changes."²⁴

Thus, in principle, religion is a historical social phenomenon. Therefore, its birth, existence and disappearance are due to the level of economic, scientific, cultural, social, etc. development instead of the subjective will of man. Marxism - Leninism also mentioned: "The high stage of communism along with the destruction of its social base and historical reality prove that, socialist society will be a relatively long historical process, and religion as a form of social consciousness that reflects social existence will also last long in socialism."²⁵ There are three basic reasons for the survival of religion in socialism, which F. Engels once mentioned in his research works on religion.

First, different social forces have not been completely annihilated.

Second, the distinctiveness of the natural force is not completely lost.

Third, the aftermath of traditional beliefs and influence of foreign religions.

Besides, there are still causes and conditions for the survival of religion in socialism, such as: fear, suffering from reality, cognitive limitations when there are too many unanswered questions; the ability to comfort, motivate and cleanse human spirit; abuse of religion by different powers for political purposes; the ability of secularization and entry into worlds of religion, etc.

Thus, while religion is a fictional reflection of the real world, its appearance and existence are neither gratuitous nor an unreasonable mistake of man. Spirkin also reasoned: "If religion is simply a transient mistake of the human mind, it would not have been able to occupy the central position in the structure of social consciousness for two

thousand years, and it would have disappeared as soon as science and philosophy present their answers for the basic problems of existence against it."²⁶ That understanding helps to see that religion is a legitimate need of a part of the population. In *Socialism and Chinese religion*, Zhou Enlai said that *Religious belief* is still a long-term and objective issue: "People believing in religion are not only present in the socialist state. In the future of communist society, religion may completely be gone. But at present, we cannot talk about its death."²⁷ Clearly, Zhou Enlai wanted to mind us of the too early optimistic psychology about the "death of religion". President Ho Chi Minh also affirmed the survival of religion in socialism as an objective fact. "The Communist Party does not destroy religion, but protect it. The Communist Party only destroys the crime of people exploiting people"²⁸. The long-standing of religion is also made clear in a way that, since World War II, the number of religions has all but decreased. According to the *British Encyclopaedia*, in 1991: "Believers of all kinds of religions make up 4/5 of population in the world. Japan, a country with advanced science and technology is also a country with no less than 770 cults."²⁹ Today, the world has about 10,000 different religions.³⁰ It proves that religion will be long-lasting with the development of human society.

V. CONCLUSION

In short, there are many similarities and also differences between religion and socialism. In essence, the biggest difference between religion and socialism is their worldviews. This seems to make it difficult for religion and socialism to co-exist, but this is a fact that both have to accept in the current situation. In the context of socialism, religion will continue to exist and will still promote its critical influence in human's social life. Because, religion already has points of resemblance with socialism. However, as a form of social consciousness, religion will continue to subject to the convention of social existence, which is the evolutionary development in terms of science, technology, politics, economy, culture, society, etc. Thus, religion will have many new forms of existence and its expression will have unpredictable changes. Although there are differences between religion and socialism, communist humanitarianism and religion humanitarianism are not mutually exclusive, but rather share many contents in common. Therefore, religion still has strong enough foundation to survive and develop; however, the role of religion in the community has had certain changes. Thus, leaders of countries should be interested in researching religion-related matters in order to overcome its negative influences and promote its positive impacts on social life; respect and encourage the promotion of cultural and ethic values of religion to make human life better and better./.

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