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VIETNAMESE CATHOLICS AND VIETNAMESE BUDDHISTS IN GERMANY: THEIR POSITION IN LOCAL RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

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Introduction

In this paper I will focus on three questions. First I give an overview of the pluralistic situation in Germany, mainly dominated by both Catholic and Protestant Christianity, but in recent decades there has also been a spread of other Christian denominations and non-Christian religions, mainly Islam, but also Buddhism and – with less numbers - Hindus, by converts and by migrating people. Then I will shortly present the situation of religious practices and organizations of people of Vietnamese origin in Germany, mainly Buddhists, but also Roman Catholic Christians and member of Protestant and independent Christian churches. Thus I hope to contribute to a better knowledge of Vietnamese people within German society and religious pluralism.

1. Religious Pluralism in Germany

After the Second World War religious pluralism was winning ground in Germany. In this situation new questions came up. Although individual adherents of non-Christian religions already were present in Germany since the early 20th century, in the 1960s so-called guest workers from Bosnia and Turkey came to Germany, being either Sunni

Muslims or Alewites, bringing Islam to the awareness of many Germans for the first time. Starting in the late 1960s, furthermore missionary gurus of diverse Hindu traditions began to spread their religions and practice in Germany, and also Tibetan Buddhist monks came as refugees. As a result of such demographic changes, Christianity faced some decline in percentage since that time, giving way to more pluralism. Today 82 million people live in Germany, and of course, due to historical reasons, Christianity is still the widest spread religion in Germany. The Roman-Catholic Church and the Protestant Church (including smaller denominations like Baptists) both currently have about 27 million members, the Orthodox Churches together (mainly the Greek Orthodox and the Russian Orthodox Church) have 1.2 million members. About 115,000 people belong to one of the ethnic-based Oriental Churches (Armenians, Copts, Syrians). But also other Christian communities like the Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses have several thousand members each.

Muslims are the second largest religious group with about 3,200,000 people; 80% of them are of Turkish origin. Some 200,000 person are Iranians belonging to the Shi'i tradition within Islam and 410,000 people are Alewites. Although the number of Muslims in Germany is thus quite high, one can easily observe that Islam – in public opinion – has a low profile, and only about 14,000 persons of German origin converted to Islam. This is quite interesting to observe, when we compare this number to Buddhists in Germany; since the late 1960s the number of Buddhists has risen constantly, depending on two factors, “conversion”

and migration. Nowadays about 150,000 German-born persons have taken the “three jewels”, taking refuge to Lord Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. Also Buddhists from Asian countries came as refugees to Germany, totalling now between 120,000 and 140,000 persons. Among the Asian Buddhists in Germany, the Vietnamese are the biggest group. They came to Germany from 1978 on as refugees or “boat people” after the war in Vietnam; a small number also came as “contract workers” to the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and stayed in Germany after the GDR and Western Germany were re-united in 1990. On the religious level the former contract workers and their families are to a large degree still religiously desinterested, among the former boat people there is a relatively high number of catholic Christians, while about 60,000 people are Buddhists. According to numbers, the Vietnamese Buddhists are followed by Thai people. – On the Hindu side, also starting in the late 1970s a new situation appeared, because refugees mainly from Sri Lanka fled civil war in their home country and found a place to stay in Germany, therefore around 45,000 Tamil Hindus live here now. Another refugee group in Germany that arrived in the 1990s are several thousands of Hindus and Sikhs from Afghanistan, seeking shelter from the persecution by the Afghan governments at that time. Another group consists of 40,000 Hindus from North India – businessmen, students, professionals – who migrated to Germany during the last three decades. The most recent and significant change of religious demography in Germany appeared during the 1990s as a result of the political changes in the former

communist countries of Eastern Europe, when about 75,000 Jewish people mainly from the former USSR migrated to Germany, thus increasing the number of Jews to 100,000.

From this overview we can conclude that the rise of religious pluralism in Germany is the result of global political changes which brought large numbers of both non-Christians, but also of Christians from Asian countries to Germany. Turning to statistics, at the moment there are 84,000 Vietnamese people living in Germany. While big numbers already came since 1979 as “boat people” to Western Germany and since 1982 as contract workers to the GDR, there is also an influx of Vietnamese people to Germany during the last two centuries, partly due to processes of unification of families and relatives, partly also to other reasons of migration. The last statistical data available for 2009 show, that 4,200 people migrated from Vietnam to Germany, while 3,600 Vietnamese people living in Germany returned to Vietnam in the same year. Besides these numbers, one also has to take into account that about 43,000 persons of Vietnamese origin have got German citizenship. So we can estimate that at the moment about 127,000 Vietnamese live in Germany. Generally speaking, these people are well integrated into German society and the younger generation has acquired a high level of education, though even 20 years after the unification of Germany one can observe some advantages for those Vietnamese who had come as boat people to Germany compared with the families of the former contract workers in Eastern Germany. But these differences between Vietnamese in the Eastern and Western parts of Germany are not only a result of historical

circumstances, but reflect also the general German situation that the eastern parts of the country have still disadvantages compared to the old federal states in Western Germany. On the level of religion this also reflects that both for Buddhists and Christians there are more religious centres and communities in the western parts.

2) *Vietnamese Buddhism in Germany*

The starting point of “Vietnamese Buddhism” in Germany can be marked with the refugees after 1975. It has been estimated that about 60-80% of these people had been Buddhists who got spiritual guidance by a small number of monks and nuns. In the year 1978, in Hannover a small Vietnamese temple was established by the monk Thich Nhu Dien, first in a private apartment. Due to growing numbers of Buddhists, the monk moved in 1981 to a larger building to provide regular religious service, and he started making plans for establishing a fully functioning pagoda. After preparation work it was possible to lay the foundation stone for the first Vietnamese pagoda in Germany in the summer 1987. The opening ceremony of the new pagoda, named *Vien Giac*, was conducted on July, 27th 1991, even that the pagoda was not yet quite finished. During the next years, Thich Nhu Dien was able to organize and expand the pagoda even more, with the result that nowadays the *Vien Giac* pagoda in Hannover is not only the main centre of Vietnamese Buddhism in Germany, but it also attracts Vietnamese (and to a minor degree other Mahayana orientated) Buddhist from the neighbouring countries. The importance of *Vien Giac* – clearly crossing the German borders – was recently highlighted by hosting the Jade

Buddha in June 2011. The huge and very heavy statue of the Jade Buddha has before been presented on a worldwide tour in Vietnam, Canada, and the United States of America. Putting it for a stop also to the *Vien Giac* Pagoda can be seen as a token of international acceptance of the Vietnamese temple in Hannover as a “transnational” Buddhist centre in Europe.

The regular service in the pagoda can be described in short as follows: Daily worship takes place both at 6a.m. and at 5p.m. The morning service focuses on the recitation of Sutras (mainly Shurangama-Sutra) and the name of Buddha; the service ends with silent meditation for about 15 minutes. The afternoon service concentrates on ancestors and the recitation of the Amitabha-Buddha-Sutra on behalf of and the benefit for the ancestors to give them redemption from hell. Offerings for wandering ghosts, consisting of rice and a cup of water, also characterize the afternoon services. All recitations and prayers are held in classical and modern Vietnamese language, accompanied by music, the sound of bells, gongs and drums. Depending on the presence of further monks in the pagoda, at some occasions during the year there can even be up to four religious ceremonies in the pagoda a day.

Besides this, at least the Tet-festival, the Wesak-festival and the Ullambana-festival are celebrated; these festivals not only serve the religious needs of the people, but they are also great events for the community. For these opportunities, many Vietnamese living outside Hannover come to the pagoda to meet with others to strengthen bonds among each other and preserve their cultural Vietnamese heritage far away from

their homeland. Especially for the second generation, already born in Germany, these festivals have their main importance as tokens to foster Vietnamese values and identity.

Attending the ceremonies in the pagoda, one can observe that native German people are an absolute minority in partaking in these Vietnamese Buddhist practices. The main reason for this is still the language barrier, because the main language during the rituals is classical and modern Vietnamese, generally not comprehensible to the minority of Germans coming to the pagoda. Also besides the barrier of language, there is only limited interaction and exchange between German and Vietnamese Buddhist. Loc Ho, a monk from the pagoda who did research on Vietnamese Buddhists both in Germany and in the United States of America some years ago, gave several reasons for these limited contacts. He mentions not only the general difference between German and Vietnamese culture and mentality, but he lays emphasis on the fact that German Buddhists have sometimes problems in accepting the clear hierarchical order between monks and lay persons. Germans – in a “more westernized” way – argue that every person can practice Buddhism, therefore strong hierarchies are not necessary. The other thing which seems less attractive for German Buddhists in regard to Vietnamese practices is the latter’s combination of ancestor worship (partly also based on Confucian traditions) and Buddhism and the veneration of ancestors which is strange for Buddhists from a German background. Therefore German Buddhists feel more attracted by other Mahayana practices like

Tibetan or Japanese Zen-orientated traditions, which don't put much relevance to ancestors in their Buddhists "temples".

Regarding other Buddhists of Asian origin in Germany, due to the relevance of ancestor worship, Vietnamese Buddhists keep their specific identity. This also leads to efforts during the last years to arrange for special funeral rites and possibilities to deposit the urn in a special funeral area. In Hannover, but also in other towns with Vietnamese communities like Hamburg, Berlin, Oldenburg or Monchengladbach, there have been established separate areas in public graveyards for Vietnamese Buddhists. This has the advantage that funeral rites can be conducted in a better way without leading to conflict with other religious traditions. Even if such special areas are highly well-come, still some problems remain: According to German law, some funeral practices cannot be held; When a person has died, time is limited until the funeral has to take place, which makes it necessary to shorten the ritual treatment (especially, when a person dies in hospital). Also after cremation, according to German administrative practice, there occurs a gap between the cremation and the possibility to deposit the funeral urn in the graveyard. Many Vietnamese wish to deposit the urn in the Pagoda, but this is forbidden by law. But the special "burial grounds" in a graveyard offer at least some alternatives for practicing funeral services.

Such a short description can give a first impression of Vietnamese Buddhists in Germany. When focussing on the Vien Giac Pagoda in Hannover, one has to keep in mind that

this is not only the oldest and most excellently established Vietnamese centre in Germany, but also the leading centre. Therefore several other centres have been founded either directly or with substantial support from the pagoda in Hannover. One of the most recent “offsprings” of it is the *Vien Duc* monastery outside the village Eschach in the South of Germany, focussing on the Vietnamese way of “Pure Land Buddhism”. This Vietnamese monastery has been in function since July 2008. But also other temples (like the Tam Biac or the Pho Bao, both in Munich) hold close connections with Hannover. Worth of special mentioning is also the Bao Quang Pagoda in Hamburg, which has been founded in 1986 and is headed by the nun Thich Nu Dieu Tam. All these temples are members of the “Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (Germany section)”. On this organisation level it becomes clear that Vietnamese Buddhists in Germany not only hold strong connections to Buddhism in Vietnam, but the temples – by the means of these bonds with Vietnam – also function as institutions which help to uphold the ties with Vietnam as home-country of the people coming to the temple. Therefore we can conclude that these temples play an important role in maintaining Vietnamese culture (and language) also in the diasporic situation in Germany. For this reason, the temples try to uphold the use of Vietnamese language in the rituals and ceremonies, which – of course – is not out of any risk, because people of the younger generation – born in Germany – can speak German well, but their knowledge of Vietnamese is partly decreasing. So older people sometimes talk about their sorrow that the younger or the next

generation will lose the ability to understand Vietnamese well. So the temples also serve in this way for the community by maintaining language skills. But on the other hand this also has the price that Vietnamese temples – as mentioned above – attract less numbers of German Buddhist than other temples.

The connection of most of the Vietnamese temples with the “Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam” leads to the last observation: Due to this reason, these temples are not members of the “German Buddhist Union”, which is an umbrella organization for many different Buddhist groups and communities from all traditions. The connection with the “Unified Buddhist Church” has until now been a hindrance to join the German Buddhist Union, because the different structure of the two organizations are hard to combine with each other. But this difference sets the Vietnamese Buddhists sometimes a little bit apart from “Buddhism in Germany” but partly also from the further groups, which have connections with Vietnam. In Frankfurt since 2002 the Phat Hue temple has been working, run by Thich Thien Son. The temple follows the Linchi Zen tradition, attracting many Germans and international guests, of course also Vietnamese. In recent time the temple faces difficulties among the Buddhist community, because the abbot’s qualifications and moral standards have been questioned several times. So – at least among his Vietnamese followers – some decline of attraction can be observed. – At last one must mention a lot of groups which have close or loose connection with Plume Village in France, founded by the monk Thich Nhat Hanh. Most of

them are run by German (or Western) people who had been authorized by the famous monk; but despite of his Vietnamese origin, Vietnamese people in Germany only to a very limited number are attracted by these groups. Sometimes they argue that Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching is incomprehensible from the perspective of a "traditional" Vietnamese Buddhist point of view; they also mention as a further reason for their limited interest in Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching that his "Engaged Buddhism" is mainly aimed at Western people, but not at Vietnamese.

Having this in mind, we can say that Vietnamese Buddhism in Germany mainly has kept his "traditional" Vietnamese perspectives, even if it was necessary to give way to some changes due to the minority situation, which for example reduced some rituals. In order to keep with traditional lines, has – until now – prevented that the Vietnamese temples join the German Buddhist Union as an umbrella organization for all Buddhists in Germany, but to my impression, this is not a big problem for the prospering of the Vietnamese temples.

3) The Christian communities of people of Vietnamese origin

3.1 The Roman Catholic tradition

Within the Roman Catholic tradition there are communities of people origination from Asian countries. For this reason, the conference of Catholic Bishops in Germany has established a commission on behalf of migrant Catholics in 1996, which also provides statistical data; according to this data we know that about 12,000-14,000 Catholics from Vietnam are now living in Germany; the

main communities (according to numbers) are in the cities Freiburg, Cologne, Munich, Berlin, Munster and Wurzburg. Although there are ethnical communities in different places, the ecclesiology of the Roman-Catholic Church emphasises the idea that only one universal church exists. Therefore attempts have always been made to integrate these Catholics from a non-German background into local German parishes, but only with limited success. Catholic theology clearly has to handle a situation that makes it necessary for pastoral care to provide religious service for the diverse ethnical groups within the church which also takes into account that not all Christians of Asian origin master German language. But Catholic theology also has to avoid creating a body of “independent” national churches which counteracts the idea of the one and universal (meaning “Catholic”) church. So the Conference of the Catholic Bishops is always working on integrating these Christians from Asian countries into local German parishes and communities, by encouraging all Catholics to take steps for a better mutual understanding – irrespective of one’s ethical and cultural background to foster the unity of the church.

But – comparable to the situation of Buddhists – the religious communities are a stronghold of ethnic and cultural identity, therefore the local Vietnamese Catholic communities go a “double way”. They keep up the unity with the Catholic Church as a whole, by using local Roman Catholic Churches for their own religious services. Generally one can observe for the most – smaller – places where Vietnamese Catholics live that at least once in a month Catholic Mass is read in Vietnamese language on

Sunday, while in the bigger communities mass is read every Sunday. As any Catholic should attend mass every Sunday, Vietnamese Catholics have the choice either to join German (or sometimes French) speaking communities for Sunday service or to go by car to another town where a mass in Vietnamese is taking place. As I was told by some people, the second possibility is preferred by many – not because of their lack of knowledge of German, but because of communal reason: Attending mass in Vietnamese language with other people of Vietnamese origin offers the opportunity to experience not only Catholicism, but also Vietnamese Catholicism and culture. Thus also for the Catholics – despite the theological level of being part of one worldwide Catholic community – they also use the Sunday service to uphold the idea of a “local ethnically defined Vietnamese Catholicism” for identity reasons, comparable to Buddhists.

This can be observed even outside the local context with two big events: Since more than thirty years, during the religious holidays at Pentecost (either in May or June) several thousands of Vietnamese Catholics meet in Aschaffenburg halfway between Frankfurt and Würzburg for the “Vietnamese Catholics’ day”. This three day religious festival serves not only religious purposes, but functions also as a Catholic cultural festival, attracting during the last years also small numbers of Vietnamese Catholics living in Austria and Switzerland, neighbouring countries to Germany, thus creating transnational connections among the Vietnamese people in Central Europe. – Similar transnational connections can be seen

in the Vietnamese pilgrimage to the Belgian village Banneux. Banneux is a pilgrimage site because of a Marian apparition in 1933 and a pilgrimage site since then. Vietnamese people from Germany, but also northern France, Belgium or the Netherlands have started to go there for pilgrimage since the 1990s, creating a “connection” between the “Lady of La Vang”, a Marian apparition in 1798 in the province Quang Tri in Central Vietnam, and the Belgium place. Thus we can observe the idea of a local Vietnamese Marian shrine, which is out of reach for Vietnamese in Germany, being transferred to another local Marian shrine, which can be reached – e.g. from Cologne in – only one and a half hour by private car. The collective “Vietnamese Catholics day” and the – until now – individual pilgrimage to Banneux are the two most impressive changes of Vietnamese religious practice that have originated as innovations in Germany.

3.2. Protestant and independent Christian communities

The situation for the Protestant Church differs from the catholic situation due to several reasons. People who migrated from Asian Countries to Germany, in most cases are or become members of Pentecostal communities in a broader sense. Thus exact statistical data are largely missing. Often these diaspora communities have no links to the larger Protestant churches in Germany, but try to keep contacts with Pentecostal churches in their homeland. Among Protestantism, two Vietnamese traditions are very active now in Germany.

The one is the Tin Lanh Community: The origins of the Tin Lanh community go back to the first Protestant

missionaries who came to Vietnam in 1911. Since 1984 the community is active in Germany on an organized level. Tin Lanh has several hundred members in Germany, situated in cities like Wuppertal, Berlin, Wolfenbuttel, Gießen or Hermannsburg. According to German law, the community is organized as an association, headed by a board consisting of four persons. There is a clear community structure for all Tin Lanh members in Germany. Comparable to the Vietnamese Catholics' Day, but with no ecumenical contacts, also the Tin Lanh Communities meet every year at Pentecost for a church congress to strengthen the relationship among the community's members. The local communities are headed by a minister or a preacher who is working on a voluntary basis for the Church, while executing some other job as main business. The religious services focuses both on prayer meetings on Sunday in some local Protestant church, and on meetings for reading and studying the Bible, partly also in private houses. The last mentioned practice also attracts Vietnamese, which are not officially members of a Tin Lanh community, thus offering good possibilities for missionary work of the community members to convert other Vietnamese to their Christian religion.

Christian missionary concerns among Vietnamese are also an important part of religious practice of the "Vietnamese Community of the Gospel, Berlin" (in German: Vietnamesische Evangeliums-Gemeinde, Berlin), which has an evangelical setting. The main proponent of this community is Joshua Hue Nhat Nguyen, who was a former Buddhist monk, who converted to evangelical

Christianity in 1980 in Vietnam. Since 1998 he has been in Germany, being very active also outside his community in propagating his Christian faith among Vietnamese, irrespective of their religious background.

4. Conclusion

Vietnamese people are a small, but visible part of Buddhist and Christian diversity in Germany. The description of the communities and their organizations has shown that practically all the communities are working in a double way, though fostering primarily cultural interaction among the Vietnamese, they are also open for contacts with the German “host society”. This can be seen in the efforts of the local temples of the “Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam”, who slowly start to add to their services also practices of meditation related to Chan traditions in order to attract more German Buddhists, who often say, they are more interested in meditation than in rituals. Other forms of religious interaction with the German society can be observed among the Vietnamese Catholics who at least partly join “German Catholic services” and cooperate with German Catholic fellow believers. – Beside such religious contacts, one also has to observe that contacts crossing religious borders in an ecumenical way are largely missing until now: Contact to non-Vietnamese Buddhist groups of other traditions are very limited and the same is true regarding contacts between Vietnamese Catholics and/or Protestants either with their Vietnamese fellow Christians or with German Christians from another confession. Thus we come to the result that Vietnamese people are well integrated in German profane society regarding education,

business, work and also social contacts, but on the religious level they largely go along Vietnamese and implicitly exclusive religious lines; of course, this religious “separation” from each other does not create conflicts, but it keeps the communities on the level of religion apart from each other. As a task for the future one can suppose that crossing such religious borders might further lead to an even better integration of Vietnamese people into German society, and may also help for mutual understanding in interreligious dialogues between Christian and Buddhists for the benefits of the whole society.