




**Difficulties in Buddhist-Catholic Marriages:
A Case Study in Ho Chi Minh City
and Dong Nai Province, Vietnam**

Tran Duy Hieu^{[a]*}

^[a] *Ph.D (Religious Studies), College of Religious Studies,
Mahidol University, Thailand.*

** Author for coresspondence email; trunghieu7903@yahoo.com*



[Abstract]

Buddhism and Roman Catholicism are the two largest religions in Vietnam, and Buddhist-Catholic marriages are quite common amongst the Vietnamese. However, religious differences have created difficulties for many Buddhist-Catholic couples. The paper examines the difficulties and disagreements found in Buddhist-Catholic marriages in Ho Chi Minh City and Dong Nai province. Basing on a survey conducted on 167 Buddhist-Catholic couples, the study investigates the difficulties that Buddhist-Catholic couples have experienced, and the ways in which they have dealt with disagreements, particularly those over religious matters. This paper argues that initial parental disapproval, obstacles resulting from the regulations of the Catholic Church, pressure to convert in order to get married, disagreement on which religion to practice at home, disagreement over children's religious upbringing are among the most common difficulties that Buddhist-Catholic couples come against in their marriage. Those difficulties which are caused by the couples themselves, as well as by their families and religious regulations (i.e. of

the Catholic Church) on inter-faith marriage, can lead to separation or divorce. Drawing on the analysis of the survey data, the study also provides suggestions for Buddhist-Catholic couples, highlighting the importance of ancestor worship.

Keywords: Difficulties, Buddhist, Catholic, Marriage, Ho Chi Minh City, Dong Nai.

Introduction

Vietnam, a Southeast Asian country located at the crossroads between two ancient civilizations, India and China, has had ample opportunities to absorb ideas, cultures, and religions from foreign countries. Many major religions in the world have flowed into Vietnam in turn. These are Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Catholicism, and Islam (Nguyễn Hồng Dương,¹ As a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation, Vietnam has even been called the ‘museum of religion and religious beliefs’.²

In the historical process of religious change in Vietnam, most of the main religions and some new religious movements have survived well and are being developed, while some indigenous religions and beliefs have become less influential and even totally disappeared. For instance, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism entered Vietnam very early (from the 1st century to the end of the 2nd century). They have had a strong influence on the Vietnamese culture and people’s lifestyle in spite of the various vicissitudes they have undergone throughout history. Catholicism also encountered difficulties in the early days when missionary work began, but the number of adherents is now increasing rapidly. The arrival of Protestantism was considerably later than those of the other exogenous

¹ For more on the religions practiced in Vietnam, see Nguyen Hong Duong, *Diversity of Religion in Vietnam*. <http://www.vjol.info/index.php/RSREV/article/view-File/9636/8887>

² Trương Hải Cường, *Một Số Vấn Đề Tín Ngưỡng Tôn Giáo ở Việt Nam Hiện Nay (Some Issues of Religious Belief in Today’s Vietnam)*, Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Chính Trị Quốc Gia, 2012, p.10.

religions, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At present, it has less influence in the public sphere than them, because the growth of Protestant believers is mainly found among minority peoples living in highland regions. Hinduism and Islam were introduced to Vietnam rather early, around the end of the tenth century and the beginning of eleventh century, but adherents of these two religious groups are associated with the Cham ethnic-minority people, living in the south-central coastal area and in the west-east (Mekong Delta) of the country.³

Although there are various religions and indigenous traditions practiced in Vietnam, this paper mainly focuses on Buddhism and Roman Catholicism, because, in term of numbers, they are the two largest religions in the country today. Their adherents exist in all regions of the country from North to South. Buddhist-Catholic marriages are quite common amongst the Vietnamese.

In contemporary Vietnam, Buddhist-Catholic marriages are fairly common, especially among young people. Buddhist-Catholic couples can flourish in marriage and enjoy a beautiful family life. However, there are number of potential problems that they may face and need to overcome before and after their marriage. These include disagreements over issues of general lifestyle and values, as well as those concerning religious matters. This may happen to any couple, regardless of their religious background, i.e. whether they are Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Caodists, ancestor-worship practitioners, or even atheists. However, in the contemporary Vietnamese context, Buddhist-Catholic marriages tend to be a serious concern for the families and communities involved, as this can lead to dissensions and conflicts between them.

The paper, therefore, examines problems surrounding Buddhist-Catholic marriages in contemporary Vietnam. It focuses on two places in the South,

³ The Socialist Republic of Vietnam, *Religion and Policies Regarding Religion in Vietnam*, Government Committee for Religious Affairs of Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Hanoi, pp.3-43.

Ho Chi Minh City and the Dong Nai province. This is because the number of Buddhist-Catholic marriages in Vietnam in general and in Ho Chi Minh City and Dong Nai province in particular has been on the rise.⁴ These two places have significant populations of both Buddhists and Catholics and have witnessed a long history of relations between the two religious communities. Differences of teachings between Buddhism and Catholicism, and between practices of Vietnamese Buddhists and Catholics in the past, have created difficulties and complications in their marriages.

Research Objectives

- To present an Overview of Buddhist-Catholic Marriage in Vietnam
- To investigate major difficulties that Buddhist-Catholic couples experience in their marriage.
- To provide some suggestions for Buddhist-Catholic couples.

Research Methods

The paper employs the method of case study based on fieldwork. It is an in-depth study of a particular situation which brings us to an understanding of a complex issue or object. ‘The case study emphasizes detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationship’⁵. The present case study is a research of Buddhist-Catholic marriages in Ho Chi Minh City and Dong Nai province, Vietnam. In addition, the method of ethnography is also applied to the research. This is a necessary method which makes the study clearer and more specific. Ethnographic research is an essential means for the researcher ‘to study

⁴ This is based on the statistics of the Catholic Vietnamese Church about inter-faith marriage in Ho Chi Minh city and Dong Nai province, which shall be mentioned in later chapters.

⁵ S.K. Maangal and Shubhra Mangal, *Research Methodology in Behavioural Sciences*, PHI Learning Private Limited, Delhi, 2013, p.191.

an intact cultural group in natural setting over a prolonged period of time'⁶. By this, the researcher describes, analyzes, and interprets a culture-sharing group's shared patterns of behavior, beliefs, and language that develop over time⁷.

Data in this research were collected by two methods of data collection: documentary research and interviews. Regarding the interviews, the researcher interviewed two groups of people from each religion. Through in-person interviews, the researcher was able to get raw data from the respondents' answers, which reflects their own experience on what the study aimed to ascertain. The interviews are semi-structured: the researcher asked questions that had been prepared in advance. However, other questions were also asked when deemed necessary. By doing so, the researcher could directly discuss with them about essential issues related to the research questions and obtain additional information that allowed for a more detailed analysis of their situations.

An Overview of Buddhist-Catholic Marriage in Vietnam

Inter-faith marriages were very rare in the early history of Buddhist-Catholic relations in Vietnam. In the traditional society, influenced by the feudal system, hierarchy within the family was extremely important. This meant that marriage was conceived of as an alliance between two families, rather than two individuals, and was typically arranged by parents and elderly members of the family.⁸ The similarity of religious and social backgrounds between the bride and bridegroom's families was the primary consideration of the marriage.⁹ It was unacceptable to give their children in marriage to a person of another faith. This was because

⁶ Ronald C. Marrtella, J. Ron Nelson, Robert L. Morgan, and Nancy E. Marchand-Martella, *Understanding and Interpreting Educational Research*, The Guilford Press, New York: 2013, p. 335.

⁷ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, 2013, p.90.

⁸ The traditional marriage practice will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

⁹ Pham Van Bich, *op. cit.*, p.105.

marrying a person outside of their own faith, for them, was tantamount to losing the family tradition. The perceived incompatibility of marriage between Buddhists and Catholics in the past is a particularly significant factor in the former generations' lack of sympathy towards interfaith marriage, resulting in the rare occurrence of Buddhist-Catholic marriages before contemporary times.

The first recorded case of a Buddhist-Catholic marriage in Vietnam took place only 80 years ago, in 1934. It is virtually the only example of a recorded Buddhist-Catholic marriage before the contemporary period. The marriage was between a Vietnamese Buddhist emperor Bao Dai and a Roman Catholic woman. Born Nguyen Phuc Vinh Thuy, Bao Dai (*Keeper of Greatness*) was the thirteenth emperor of the Nguyen dynasty, and the last emperor of the feudal system of Vietnam. Throughout the history of imperial dynasties of Vietnam, this is an extremely rare case in which a Vietnamese king married a person of a different religion.

Bao Dai's example is highly relevant to the present study, because it shows a typical set of difficulties that accompany marriages between people of different religious faiths on political, cultural, and religious levels in Vietnam. His case is also extremely important in that it paved the way for the practice of inter-faith marriage among the Vietnamese. Following their marriage, the Roman Catholic Church made considerable changes to its attitudes toward inter-faith marriage, and started issuing dispensations (permission for interfaith marriage) in Vietnam.

There are no statistics of marriages between Buddhist and non-Buddhists in Vietnam, but statistics are available for marriages between Catholics and non-Catholics in general. According to the records kept by the Vietnam Catholic Church, the number of marriages between Catholics and non-Catholics has increased particularly after the Second Vatican Council, when it officially allowed its adherents to marry non-Catholics. Although there are many people who marry without converting, new converts for marriage are also large in number. Within 80 years since the case of King Bao Dai, the number of marriages between Catholics and non-Catholics in

Vietnam has reached almost 67,780 in 2007¹⁰. According to the statistics announced by the Church in 2006, the number of converts to marry Catholics is 31,576, accounting for 1/5 of new converts in the whole country.¹¹ The number of new converts to marry Catholics in 2007 is 67,780. For the period of 2000-2008, the average number of converts per year is about 35,000 people, among those, 80-90% converted to Catholicism in order to marry a Catholic.¹² This statistic does not say specifically how many of them are from Buddhist-Catholic marriages. However, it can be surmised that given the drastic increase in marriages between Catholics and non-Catholics, and the sheer size of Buddhist population in the country, those between Buddhists and Catholics has also increased considerably.

Major Difficulties in Buddhist-Catholic Inter-marriage and the Ways that those Couples Deal with Them

Based on information and data from the 167 respondents, this section discusses major difficulties that have been experienced in Buddhist-Catholic marriages in the South Vietnam in general, and in Ho Chi Minh City and Dong Nai province in particular. It will examine the difficulties accompanying Buddhist-Catholic marriage in two stages including pre-marriage and post-marriage. The discussion first deals with initial parental resistance and obstacles resulting from the regulations of the Catholic Church on inter-faith marriage, the two first common difficulties of pre-marriage. It will examine the reasons for parental disapproval to their children's inter-faith marriage, the ways in which the children (i.e. the couple) attempt to deal with this problem and the consequences of which those couples have experienced in their marriage without parents'

¹⁰ Phạm Huy Thông, *Sự Giao Thoa giữa Đức Tin và Văn Hóa Dân Tộc* (Catholic Lifestyle: the Interference between Faith and national Culture), <http://vietcatholic.com/News/Html/83171.htm>.

¹¹ Phạm Huy Thông, *op.cit.* <http://btgcp.gov.vn/Plus.aspx/vi/News/38/0/240/0/2279/>.

¹² Lm. Antôn Nguyễn Ngọc Sơn, *Nhìn Lại Sứ Mạng Truyền Giáo trong 50 Năm và Hướng đến Tương Lai* (Looking back the Mission within 50 years and forward to the future), <http://www.catholic.org.tw/vntaiwan/09news/9news246.htm>.

approval. Besides, it also discusses the obstacle about regulations of the Catholic Church on inter-faith marriage that the couples faced in their pre-marriage stage. This is followed by an analysis of the common difficulties of the post-marriage state, discussing disagreement on religious practices, disagreement over children's religious upbringing, separation, and dissents at the end of life, particularly disagreement on the proper method of funeral.

Initial Resistance from Parents and Relatives

Usually, the first and the most common obstacle that Buddhist-Catholic couples encounter is resistance from their parents and relatives. The responses to the question "*Did either of your parents oppose your marriage when they knew that you intend to marry a person of different religion?*" shows that the majority (61%) of the respondents faced their parents' and relatives' disapproval to their decision:

Yes: 102 (61%)

No: 31 (18%)

Not oppose but not support: 43 (21%).

The major reason for this is that, in Vietnam, young people are increasingly open-minded about matters of religion, whereas their parents and relatives, who belong to an older generation, can be conservative in terms of religious beliefs. People usually live in religious communities where they grow up with their fellows who have the same belief as them. Therefore, the parents prefer to have their children married to one from their own religious community or at least have the same religion.

It was no problem if their relationship was merely friends. But once that friendship developed into a romantic relationship and the couple has started to think about marriage, they had possibly faced the first and most common difficulty, that is, initial resistance from parents and relatives. In Vietnam, neither Buddhist nor Catholic institution prevents their followers

from marrying the person of a different religion. Thus, the resistance seems to derive from the couple's family and relatives. The initial difficulty in the early stages before their marriage was not caused by the couple themselves but it frequently came from their parents and relatives. In marriage, the children today are not obedient to such a degree that '*Cha mẹ đặt đâu con ngồi đó*' (wherever the parents want the children to sit, the children will sit there) like their parents' generation had been.¹³ However, the Vietnamese has traditionally valued filial piety, respecting their parent's advice. To a certain extent, the children therefore should obey their parents and the elderly members of their family.¹⁴ Both Buddhists and Catholics also attach much importance to respecting ancestors and parents. They always express utmost respect to their parents and do not want to upset them. The children must obey elderly's instructions and get parents' permission to get married. The Vietnamese usually say 'we can get another wife or husband but not another mother or father'. Hence, it would be quite awkward if parent disapproved their children to marry people of different faith.

As is seen from the results above, the rate of Buddhist-Catholic marriages which were usually opposed by the parents and relatives in Vietnam are quite high. The respondents provided various reasons for the parents' objections. Commonly cited reasons include them, devout religious family, preventing their children's marriage from divorce, essential role of the son in the Vietnamese family, incompatible age, and prejudice against other's religion.

Obstacle on Regulations of the Catholic Church on Interfaith Marriage

Having dealt with objections of parents in the family, the next difficulty that Vietnamese Buddhist-Catholic couples encountered is that accompanying the regulations of the Catholic Church on inter-faith marriage,

¹³ Phm CDn Sn, Nguyn Minh Tin (ed), *Dng V G Chng: HDn L vā Nghi Thc (To Marry Somebody off: Wedding Ceremony and Its Rites)*, Nhà xut bn Tng Hp H Chí Minh, 2005, p.36.

¹⁴ Result of Nation-wide Survey on the Family in Vietnam 2006, Hanoi, 2008, p.28.

particularly the requirement for the non-Catholic partner to conform to Catholicism. Of the 167 respondents, 73 said they had been in this situation. If either the Buddhist or Catholic side doesn't want to convert to their partner's religion; each person gets to retain their own faith. However, regulations of the Catholic Church, specifically the one concerning the special permission the couple should obtain to enter into inter-faith marriage, could create tension for the Buddhist side. According to the regulation of the Catholic Church, in order to marry a Catholic, the couples are first required to get a special permission from the local bishop. In addition to this, the Buddhist side also has to attend the marriage preparation classes. In principle, their wedding ceremony must be held at church. A few cases have been done at home but it must be carried out according to Catholic rite and presided over by a priest. This has put many Buddhist-Catholic couples in a dilemma between the Church and non-Catholic families.¹⁵

The regulations that Buddhist partners should attend marriage classes and that their wedding should be held in a church tend to dissatisfy many Buddhist families as well as the partners themselves. Buddhist partners, unless they have agreed to convert to Catholicism, are not usually interested in learning Catholic teachings, even if that is needed to get married to a Catholic. Buddhist parents, on their part, are not interested in participating in particular Catholic rites in a church since they are Buddhists. Thus, some Buddhist parents and relatives sometimes decide not to attend the part of their children's wedding ceremony that takes place at church. They only join in the customary wedding ceremony that is held at home, which involves the practice of paying tribute to family ancestors.

It is also important to note that obstacles in inter-faith marriages sometimes arose, not because of the regulations of the Catholic Church themselves, but because of the perspective of a certain priest who is in charge of advising the couple regarding their marriage. A Catholic dignitary at Ho Chi Minh City Archdiocese, said "in the diocese of Xuan Loc of Dong Nai province, some priests still keep a rather strict point

¹⁵ See more in Tran Duy Hieu, *op.cit.*, chapter 3, pp.86-7

of view on giving special permission for inter-faith marriage. This is because some Buddhists who have a favorite view on Communism usually show strong reactions from which they would never convert to Catholicism in order to marry a Catholic. Correspondently, some priests had no sympathy for such an attitude, and they did not give special permission”.¹⁶ However, as mentioned above, the current Church regulations do not require a Buddhist to convert to Catholicism in order to marry a Catholic.

According to Catholic teachings on inter-faith marriage, by marrying without the special permission, a couple is directly setting a bad example. And by participating in the wedding ceremony of such a couple, Catholic participants are indirectly making a bad example.¹⁷ As Rev. Do Duc Luc, a Catholic dignitary at Xuan Loc diocese said “these Catholic participants in such a wedding celebration would bear the sin of ‘*vạ*’ (involvement). As a punishment, those who have attended such a wedding ceremony would not be allowed to take the Holy Communion for several months. This punishment is still strictly applied in Dong Nai province, but not in Ho Chi Minh City.¹⁸ Of the 86 respondents who have been married in Xuan Loc diocese of Dong Nai province, 11 were in such a situation. Their wedding took place outside church without the special permission. Therefore, most of Catholic guests, and even their parents and close relatives did not come to the ceremony share the newlywed’s joy. They were also reluctant to maintain contact with the newly-married couple because they were concerned about being accused of involvement.

This seems to happen only in Catholic communities. 11 respondents found themselves in this situation and all of them are Catholics. Due to getting married to a person of a different religious faith, without parental approval or the special permission from the church, some newly married couples were pushed away from the Catholic community. This behavior mostly

¹⁶ Researcher’s interview with a Catholic priest at Ho Chi Minh, 29th March 2015

¹⁷ See in the Catholic Law no. 1086 and 1108

¹⁸ Researcher’s interview with a Catholic priest at Xuan Loc diocese, Dong Nai, 20th April 2015

has happened in Xuan Loc Diocese of Dong Nai province, where Catholic adherents have still been afraid of the sin 'vạ' (involvement).

Disagreement of Religious Practices

Another disagreement that Buddhist-Catholic couples sometimes encountered in their marriage is on whether Buddhism or Catholicism would be dominant in their family, and if so, which one. Normally, at first the husband's religion would dominate in the family since the newly-married couple had to live with the husband's family for a period of time. However, when the newly married couple moves to a separate house of their own, they start to notice more differences in their religious practices, i.e. between Buddhism and Catholicism. Out of the 167 respondents surveyed, 63 said that they had experienced this difficulty in their marriage.

One of the common disagreements over religious practices between the two persons is whether the altar is to be set up to worship Buddhas¹⁹ or Jesus Christ²⁰. It would be no problem if both the husband and the wife professed the same religion. But, if the couple had agreed to retain their own faiths, how to set an altar in their house sometimes created a difficult situation, since each person only wanted to worship the main object(s) of worship in his/her own religions, that is, Buddhas or Jesus Christ. This issue was dealt with in four different ways, namely, setting an altar in accordance with the husband's religion, setting altars for both religions, not setting up an altar at all, and replacing the existing altar for a new one after their partner passed away.

- Setting only an altar for the main object of worship in husband's religion (39 respondents)

- Setting up two separate altars in the same house, one reserved for worshipping Buddhas, and the other reserved for worshipping Jesus Christ (5)

¹⁹ Apart from worshipping the historical Buddha, Gotama, Vietnamese Buddhists also worship Amitabha Buddha and Avalokitesvara (Guanyin) at home.

²⁰ Beside Jesus Christ, Vietnamese Catholics also worship the Mother Mary

- Not setting an altar for worship (3)

- Replacing the existing altar for a new one for with the main object of worship in the wife's religion after the husband died (11 respondents)

The responses show that, in the Vietnamese family, whether the couples live in the same house with the husband's family or have been lived in a separate house, the husband's religion tends to dominate over the wife's one. Setting up two separated altars in the same house sometimes happened, but placing both the Buddha and the Jesus statues on the same altar was unseen.

What is notable is that some female respondents said that they have replaced the initial altar set up in accordance with the husband's religion with a new one for the wife's religion, after the husband passed away (11 respondents). In these cases, the husbands kept their promise to the conditions regulated in the special permission, so that they let their wives and all children or one of them to adhere to Catholicism despite they strongly remained in Buddhism. But there was only one altar for worshipping the Buddha in their house. So, after the husbands died, the wives would replace that existing altar for a new one for worshipping the Jesus Christ.

In seriously cases, after a long time living together and experiencing many instances of such disagreement, some Buddhist-Catholic couples sometimes ended up criticizing the religion of each other. They brought up the two religious founders and their teachings in a conversation in negative ways, to hurt each other. Out of how many respondents, 5 said they had experienced such a serious disagreement.

Disagreement over Children's Religious Upbringing

Disagreement over children's religious affiliation and religious education is one of the most common causes of strife in Buddhist-Catholic marriages. Having overcome obstacles of the parents' strong disapproval and of the Catholic Church's regulations on inter-faith marriage, many couples were able to get married with the congratulations of many people. But

after a few years of living together, the real task of building a successful marriage would begin, and frustrations start to set in, particularly when their children are born. The religious identity of the children, the appropriate time for deciding the children's religious identity, and who is going to decide the religious identity of the children are always main issues leading to quarrels between the two people.

The following are the responses to the question “*Which religion do your children profess?*”.

- Buddhism: 27
- Catholicism: 98
- Both religions: no
- No religion: no
- Other choice: 42
 - One child professed the father's religion and one child professed the mother's religions: 14
 - let the children decide their own faith when they group up: 17
 - Not yet decided: 11

The issue of children's religious identity is easily settled if either the husband or the wife converted to the partner's religion before or during marriage. The couple would profess the same faith, and the children therefore would believe in their parent's one.²¹ Out of the 167 respondents, 86 had the same religion as that of their partner, and hence made their children follow their common religion.

However, in cases where the parents stuck to their own religions, the problem of deciding the children's religion was much more serious. Among the 71 respondents who said each person remained with one's own religion, 43 had disagreement concerning the children's religious identity and 28 easily agreed on the matter. Out of the 43 respondents who had disagree-

²¹ According to Midgely, ‘our relationship with religious belief has been influenced by our family, since we are product of our upbringing. Therefore, our spirituality is a product of our family of origin.’ (John M. Midgely, *Decision to Love: A Marriage Preparation Program*, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 2003, p.109-110 .

ment concerning the children's religious identity, 29 made their children follow their own religion, followers of Catholicism tend to this more often, 14 let one child profess the father's religion and the other child the mother's religion. They did this because on the one hand the Buddhist partners tried to keep their promise with the Catholic partners that letting their children to be baptized; on the other hand they wanted to have one child who can preserve the family tradition, worshipping ancestors later. If there are more than two children, normally at least one child profess Buddhism and the rest children follow Catholicism.

Typically, the Buddhist partner who decided to remain Buddhist did not keep their promise to join the Catholic partner in the children's religious upbringing in accordance with the special permission. Instead, they attempted to teach Buddhism to their children and make them worship the Buddha with them. On the other hand, the Catholic partner has an obligation to do everything in his or her power to raise the children in the Catholic faith. Thus, both the husband and the wife, whether they are Buddhist or Catholic, would be interested in imparting aspects of their own religion to their children. They wanted to teach the children about their own religious traditions. Both wanted their children to participate in events and holidays associated with the religion they themselves are part of. Neither wanted to make concessions to their partner in this regard. In some cases where the parents have stuck to their own religions the religious affiliation of their children was decided in such a way that one child followed the father's religion, and one child followed the mother's one. Normally, the son was asked to profess his father's one if the father was a Buddhist. This is because, the son, particularly the eldest one, was regarded as the person who will have to undertake the role of worshipping family ancestors as well as upholding the family tradition. If the father is Catholic, it is expected for the son to follow his father's religion, since in the Vietnamese context, 'men have more right than women'. Out of the 14 cases in which one child professed the father's religion and one child professed the mother's religion, 12 established a clear distinction between the Buddhist members and Catholic members of the family in terms of religious activities; the Buddhist parent and one child would sometimes go to temple on special

Buddhist events, while the Catholic parent and the other child regularly go to the church on Sundays. Only 2 respondents stated that they sometimes joined the activities of the other religion.

The result shows that the total number of children who professed in Catholicism was also bigger than that of children who professed in Buddhism. It might be attributable to the following reasons. First, as stipulated in the Catholic Church's regulations concerning the granting of the special permission, both Buddhist parent and Catholic one have to promise to raise their children in the Catholic tradition²². Second, there were more women than men who converted to Catholicism in marrying their Catholic partner. The third reason, which is related to the previous one, is that women tend to follow the husband's religion in raising their children²³. The last reason is that when a child is born, he/she would be baptized in Catholic tradition, following the Church regulations. It means that such a child was identified with the Catholic faith right from the start. This is well reflected in the survey result quoted above: 98 children were baptized in the Catholic tradition when they were born.

While the majority of respondents have decided their children's religion to be either Catholicism or Buddhism at an early stage of their lives, some have dealt with the issue of children's religious identity in a different way. They are willing to let their children decide on this matter when they grow up. Among those who chose the option 'other', 17 respondents said they will 'let the children decide their own faith when they grow up', and 11 respondents said that they haven't decided yet since they do not have any children yet, so they haven't thought about their religious identity.

The respondents who gave the children the right to determine their religious faith mostly come from better educated background, and a good standing in society. Due to their good educated background, they think about religious issues more open-mindedly, they don't care much about

²² See more detail about the special permission in Tran Duy Hieu, *op.cit.*, Chapter 3, p.85.

²³

religious differences, but the true love is more important to them. So they usually resort to each person retaining their own faith, and respecting the partner's religion. In other words, good education and respect are the factors that made them decide to let their children choose for themselves at a later time. Thus, it is better that the parents should leave the children the freedom and right to follow the religion that they like best. It is the same as marrying. Parents' decision on their children's religious identity from their early age is not different from the problem of arranged marriages which more common in former times, but isn't supported by the Vietnamese young today.²⁴ Drawing from the experience on the problem of arranged marriage, the parents should play the role as the counselor who gives advices and informs good things of each religion, and then let them to decide the faith for themselves.

Separation Due to Religious Differences

One of the biggest difficulties that Buddhist-Catholic couples that can encounter in their marriage is the problem of separation or divorce. According to the responses obtained, some Buddhist-Catholic marriages did not work because in addition to social reasons such as adultery, disagreement over money, incompatible personalities, and/or family violence. The couples could not overcome the above-mentioned disagreement on religious difference, and that led to separation or divorce. This creates an extremely difficult situation for them and their families, because the Vietnamese are inclined to attach significance to the family repute, conjugal affection, and particularly ties between parents and children. In some cases, in order to avoid bringing disrepute to their family, although the married life was breaking up, the couple still lived together. This may be the reasons why many couples who are in difficult marriage do not choose to divorce. Some couples have lived separately without a legal divorce since they were afraid that divorce would have negative impacts on their children. Others would obtain a legal divorce in court, but, notably, they would never raise the reason of different religion for their divorce. Furthermore, divorce is not supported by either religion and or its

²⁴ See in Tran Duy Hieu, *op.cit.*, chapter 2, p.47.

community as a whole. Buddhism does not specifically prohibit divorce, but does not support it, either.²⁵ In the Catholic tradition, as mentioned above, marriage is a lifelong commitment, and divorce therefore is not allowed. Despite this, there have been a number of cases of divorce of Catholics in general and of Buddhist-Catholic couples in particular. If divorced, Catholics usually no longer go to church. Therefore, the Church does not know the actual situations surrounding the divorce of its followers; it does not have the statistic of inter-faith marriages which end in divorce.

Dissents at the End of Life

Difficulties and problems in Buddhist-Catholic marriages are not only encountered before and during early periods of marriage when raising children, but also appeared when either the husband or the wife, particularly those who converted to their spouse's religion for marriage, got older or was nearing the end of life. According to the survey result, 9 respondents, including 5 ex-Catholics (1 converted to Buddhism and 4 gave up Catholicism but did not convert to Buddhism) and 4 ex-Buddhists were in this situation. However, ex-Buddhists and ex-Catholics experienced this kind of difficulty in rather different ways.

As for ex-Buddhists, if the husband was a Buddhist and converted to Catholicism, he, towards the end of his life, would usually expresses his desire for one of his sons, particularly the eldest son, to profess Buddhism. In so doing, he would feel secure that at least he had someone who would be in charge of worshipping their family ancestors which would include himself after his death. Faced with the prospect of their spouse's passing, the wife no longer seemed to be very strict about sticking to one (i.e. their) religion as a family; they easily accepted the converts' desires. Thus one child converts to Buddhism before his father's death. This would help the father feel secure on the remaining days at the end of his life.

²⁵ 'If a husband and wife really cannot live together, instead of living a miserable life and maltreating each other by attitude of less respect, offensive, anger, hatred, ect., they have the right to separate and live peacefully' (K. Sri. Dhammananda, *A Happy Married Life, A Buddhist Perspective*. Singapore: Dharma Propagation Division, 1987).

On the other hand, ex-Catholics, at the end of their lives, would feel conscience-stricken and guilty because they had given up their faith in order to get married to their Buddhist partners. Their conscience was troubled between their original religion and the one they had converted to. When they got older, they desired to return to their original religion, Catholicism.

Generally speaking, whether the deceased person has converted back to his or her original religion, there sometimes arises problems after their death concerning what kind of mortuary rites are to be performed for them. There would usually be no problem if the convert had made careful recommendations to their partner and children before dying, for example, that their funeral rituals should be carried out in accordance with their own religion, when they passed away. However, there were several cases in which the convert did not leave any recommendation, and this often led to a serious disagreement between the two families over the method of funeral rites for the deceased. The traditional Vietnamese used to prefer burial to cremation after death²⁶. Buddhists tend to cremate rather than to bury. They believe that if they were buried their soul would be difficult to reborn because of attachment to their physical body. Inversely, Catholics prefer burial because they believe in physical resurrection of the body at the end of time. However, with the today's development of cremation service, especially in urban areas where the burial space is limited and expensive, the Vietnamese Catholics are more inclined to cremate their deceased family members rather than burying them. After cremation, Catholic ashes are usually kept in Catholic churchyards. Buddhist ones are usually kept in temples rather than in cemeteries. So, the disagreement between the two families also included where to bury the convert or where to keep their ashes after cremation²⁷.

²⁶ According to the burial practices of the Vietnamese, after 3 years of being buried in the cemetery, the corpse would be disinterred for reburial in a new place which is their everlasting grave.

²⁷ Nowadays, all parishes in Vietnam have their own churchyard called '*Vườn Thánh*' (Holy Ground) which are only reserved for burying Catholics. As for Buddhism, only a few temples have their own graveyard. Instead, most temples in Vietnam have a separate place for keeping and worshipping ashes and picture of the deceased. Buddhist are permitted to be interred not only in the Buddhist cemetery but also in community one.

Conclusion

Marriage among people of different religious faiths was very rare in Vietnamese society in the past, it has become a common phenomenon in contemporary Vietnam and it is on the increase. Buddhist-Catholic marriages are particularly quite common amongst Vietnamese, since they are the two most common religions in Vietnam. The religious revival in Vietnam since the unification of the nation in 1976 is one of the main reasons for the increase in inter-faith marriages. During the mid and late 20th century, massive migration to the South of Vietnam has made the South highly multi-religious. It is this diverse religious environment that has made inter-religious marriages, especially the Buddhist-Catholic mix, increasingly common. Another factor in the increase of inter-religious marriages in contemporary Vietnam is the changes in the structure of the Vietnamese family. Younger generations have more open-minded attitudes toward love-based marriages, increasingly rejecting arranged marriages, and have come to pay less attention to the differences between religions.

The field study was in the context of Ho Chi Minh City and Dong Nai province in the South where Buddhism and Catholicism are the two most common religions. Through this, a detailed analysis of difficulties of Buddhist-Catholic marriage was given to get a clear picture of inter-faith marriage in Vietnam.

Based on the results from the fieldwork, the study presented difficulties and problems of Buddhist-Catholic couples who have encountered in their inter-faith married lives in contemporary Vietnam. One of the most common difficulties for young Buddhist-Catholic couples was initial resistance from parents and relatives. The major reasons for parents' disapproval of their children's Buddhist-Catholic marriage were: they were devout religious families; Catholic parents wanted to prevent their children's marriage from divorce; Buddhist parents still had prejudice against Catholic acts in the past, so they did not want their children to marry the Catholic; it is the important role of the eldest child in the Vietnamese family that many parents did not allow their oldest child to marry a person of different religion; and some Buddhist parents disapproved their

Buddhist-Catholic marriage because they regarded the couples' ages to be incompatible with each other. Additionally, young Vietnamese Buddhist-Catholic couples also met various difficulties, such as: restrictions by the Catholic Church on regulations toward the matter of inter-faith marriage, disagreement of religious practices, disagreement over children's religious upbringing, broken marriage, and dissent at the end of life.

Suggestion for Buddhist-Catholic Couples

Based on the analysis of the survey data, and especially the Buddhist and Catholic leader's responses, the following are some suggestions for Buddhist-Catholic couples who have been or are going to be married.

About the religious practices within the family, as found in a comment from Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh and the responses of some Buddhist monks: it is very wonderful if the couple profess two religious traditions at the same time. This is a chance for the husband or wife to learn and understand one more religious tradition. Both the Buddhist and Catholic partners need to learn and practice the other's tradition. It means that the husband could make a vow to learn and practice the spiritual tradition of the wife; otherwise the wife could also make a vow to learn and practice the husband's spiritual tradition. On Sunday, both the husband and wife go to church; and likewise, on the 1st and 15th lunar calendar, both go to the Buddhist temple. Both jointly learn each other's tradition, going to church at the same time, going to the temple together, being baptized in Christian tradition and taking refuge in the Triple Gem simultaneously. If they could not get such an agreement, it is best that they both remain in their own religion. But, both should promise to respect the other's interest and religious faith.

As for the children's religious upbringing, it is important for a Buddhist-Catholic couple to reach a reasonable consent of children's religious identity without hurting the partner's faith. In this case, when the children are still young, it is very interesting to follow Thich Nhat Hanh's advice that the parents can teach their children to do the same as what the parent did:

have two spiritual roots at the same time. When they get to a mature age, they can decide themselves what is best for them, and most importantly, do whatever makes them feel happy. They can even continue to profess the two religions at once, if they like. The parents should not force their children to believe in a particular religion, for any reason. The children should be raised in such a way that they can appreciate the best things in both traditions. The parents should encourage their children to have two roots and to have both the Buddha and Jesus within their lives.

Regarding disagreements over the issue of funerals, if the deceased partners had made careful recommendations to their wives and children, the living should follow their wishes. This is completely consistent with the moral tradition of the Vietnamese ‘*Nghĩa tử là nghĩa tận*’ (Death ends all conflict and hatred). If they do not leave any recommendations before dying, it is best to let their wives and children in the family to decide the funeral according to the Buddhist or Catholic services. The deceased’s parents or relatives should not interfere in their decision, but they can counsel them to perform the funeral rites better.

Finally, bridging gap in Buddhist-Catholic marriages can be done by the traditional practice of ancestor worship. In spite of potential interpretative difficulties, the practice of ancestor worship in Vietnam can provide a helpful solution for Buddhist-Catholics marriages on a practical level. Weddings are a special within Vietnamese culture: both Buddhists and Catholics come together and share moral values within the same cultural-space. As discussed in the second chapter, on the development of Buddhism and Catholicism in Vietnam, these two religions have adapted some aspects of ‘folk religious beliefs’ from the ancient traditions in the country. Both Buddhism and Catholicism attach significant moral values to the practice of their teachings, making them more appropriate to the present social contexts.²⁸ Thus, the practice of ancestor worship plays an important aspect in Buddhist-Catholic relations, and narrows the gap between these two

²⁸ Tran Duy Hieu, chapter 2, p.43

religious groups considerably. In the Vietnamese context, this traditional practice bridges over difficulties of religious differences in the married life of Buddhist-Catholic couples.

Despite varieties in their own practice, both Buddhists and Catholics have kept the practice of ancestor worship because they are Vietnamese. Buddhists and Catholics may carry out the worship of ancestor little differently from each other in terms of ritual practices, but they share the same moral values of filial piety and commemorating ancestors' merits. This is the most common standard for Buddhists and Catholics coming together closer. Particularly, it also narrows the gap of religious differences in the married life of Buddhist-Catholic couples.

In a family where the husband and the wife profess different religions, each person continues their own religious practices; but fortunately, they worship the ancestors together. As stated above, in Vietnamese families, worshipping both the Buddha's statue and Jesus in the same altar is unrealizable. In certain cases, a few Buddhist-Catholic couples may set up two separate altars within the same house: one reserved for worshipping the Buddha, and the other reserved for worshipping Jesus. This sometimes leads to quarrels between the two partners. After a long time, some couples might keep away from either the Buddha altar or the Jesus altar, but they never dared to keep away from the ancestral-shrine. This partly shows the importance of worshipping ancestors in Vietnamese families. There seems to be no discrimination of the husband's ancestors or the wife's in ancestor veneration. So, it will be indispensable that ancestors of the two parties are worshipped on the same altar without distinction of whether ancestors were Buddhist or Catholic. Obviously, in their case, there will only be one ancestral altar within a Vietnamese house.

As for Buddhist-Catholic marriages, the ancestral altar in their house becomes a bridge between the two persons of different religions, and even amongst members of the family, consisting of the husband, the wife, and their children. They can also observe common ceremonials such as '*Mùng*

thọ' (the wishing for longevity ceremony when their parent and grandparent reach the old age), '*Mừng tuổi*' (congratulating a parent and grandparent on advancing in years on the occasion of Lunar New Year's Day), '*Cầu an*' (praying for the peace of family), '*Cầu siêu*' (praying for departed ones on the Buddhist 'Vu Lan' ceremony or the whole month of November of Catholics), '*Kỷ giỗ*' (anniversaries and ancestor-worshipping days), and so on. These ceremonial events are performed in front of the ancestral altar. Buddhist-Catholic couples will not feel alien and alone in their own house because of the difference of religions.

In sum, by wholeheartedly expressing their filial piety and respect for ancestors, the two important valuable characteristics of the practice of ancestor worship of the Vietnamese in general, which are common to Buddhists and Catholics, the couples will be closely united. It will help both Buddhists and Catholics come together in the commemoration of the ancestors' merit, and bridge the gap between the spouses of different religions, considerably.

References

- Atitya, Jaroen. (1989). *The Marriage of Catholic and Buddhist: Its Celebration and Dissolution in the Pastoral Circumstances of Thailand*. Doctoral Dissertation, Academia Alfonsiana, Roma.
- Dhammananda, K. Sri. (2007). *A Happy Married Life, A Buddhist Perspective*. Singapore: Dharma Propagation Division.
- John W. Creswell. (2013). *Qualitative Inquiry Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, University of Nebraska, Lincoln.
- Mai Do. (2009). *Changing attitudes toward premarital sex in Vietnam: Evidence from a National Survey*. University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine.
- Ronald C. Marrtella, J. Ron Nelson, Robert L. Morgan, and Nancy E. Marchand-Martella. (2013). *Understanding and Interpreting*

Educational Research, The Guilford Press, New York.

Thich Nhat Hanh. (1995). *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, Riverhead Books.

_____. (1999). *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*. London: Riverhead Books.

Socialist Republic of Vietnam. (2006). *Religion and policies regarding religion in Vietnam*. Hanoi: Government Committee for Religious Affairs, Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Tran Duy Hieu. (2016). *Difficulties in Buddhist-Catholic Marriages: A Case Study in Ho Chi Minh City and Dong Nai Province, Vietnam*. Ph. D Dissertation, Copyright of Mahidol University, Thailand.

Trng Hi Cng. (2012). *Mt S Vn Tín Ngng TĐn Giáo Vit Nam Hin Nay (Some Issues of Religious Belief in Today's Vietnam)*, Hã Ni: Nhã xut bn Chính Tr Quc Gia.

UNICEF (2008). *Result of Nation-Wide Survey on the Family in Viet Nam 2006*. Hanoi: UNICEF

Phm CĐn Sn, Nguyn Minh Tin (ed). (2005). *Dng V G Chng: HĐn L vā Nghi Thc (To Marry Somebody off: Wedding Ceremony and Its Rites)*, Nhã xut bn Tng Hp H Chí Minh.

Nguyn Th Thanh Mai. (2013). “Nghi L, Chun Mc vā Tính Linh Hot Trong i Sng Gia Lnh Ca Ngi CĐng Giáo Vit Nam Hin Nay” (Ritual, Norm, and Flexibility in Family Life of Vietnamese Catholics in Today's Vietnam), *Cultural Studies*, No.3.

Catholic Church., & International Committee on English in the Liturgy. (1983). *The rites of the Catholic Church as revised by decree of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council and published by authority of Pope Paul VI*. New York: Pueblo Pub. Co.

Binh, N. T. (2012). Age at first marriage in recent years Vietnam. *Mediterranean Center of Social and Educational Research*, 3, 491.

Websites:

Nguyen Hng Dng .(n.d.). *Diversity of religion in Vietnam*. Retrieved from <http://www.vjol.info/index.php/RSREV/article/viewFile/9636/8887>

Phm Huy ThĐng. (2010, August 20). *Np sng ngi CĐng giáo: S giao thoa gia c tin vā vn hoá dĀn tc*. Retrieved from <http://vietcatholic.com/News/Html/83171.htm>.

Pham Huy Thong . (n.d.). *Li sng ca ngi CĐng giáo Vit Nam: Quá trŁnh t theo o, gi o n sng o*. Retrieved from <http://btgcp.gov.vn/Plus.aspx/vi/News/38/0/240/0/2279/>.