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## A Breath of Atheism in Religious Vietnam

*Atheism is not a fundamental notion. This negative concept is relative to the object of its negation, which pre-exists: the gods, God, or rather our ideas of him. In monotheistic regimes, such as in the West, atheism is radical and often aggressive. Since its first contacts with the West, Vietnam has experienced both extremes of this situation, through Christianity and communism. In a polytheistic regime, as in traditional Vietnam, atheism is less exclusive, more tolerant and more nuanced. Appealing to certain gods implies ignorance of, indifference to or the rejection of others; it often betrays a desire to use gods as a means to serve man, who thus believes himself to be the last link in the chain. As monotheism rejects the power of the divinity of nature and of humans, its negation can inversely result in subjecting man to nature and society to the State.*

**Key words:** *atheism · monotheism · polytheism · Vietnam · Vietnamese religions*

*L'athéisme n'est pas une donnée première. Ce concept négatif est relatif à ce qu'il nie et qui est posé en premier lieu: les dieux, Dieu ou plutôt les idées que l'on s'en fait. Dans un régime monothéiste, comme en Occident, l'athéisme est radical et souvent combatif. Depuis les premiers contacts avec l'Occident, le Vietnam est confronté, au travers du christianisme et du communisme, aux deux pôles de cette situation. Dans un régime polythéiste, comme dans le Vietnam traditionnel, il est moins exclusif, plus tolérant et peut présenter plusieurs nuances. Invoquer l'un ou l'autre dieu engendre l'ignorance, l'indifférence ou, parfois, le rejet des autres. Ce recours trahit souvent la volonté d'utiliser les dieux comme moyens au service de l'homme, qui se conçoit ainsi comme le dernier maillon de la chaîne. Si le monothéisme refuse le pouvoir de la divinité de la nature et des humains, sa négation peut finir inversement par soumettre l'homme à la nature et la société, à l'État.*

**Mots-clés:** *athéisme · monothéisme · polythéisme · religions vietnamiennes · Vietnam*

The Vietnamese are a religious people. From the 18th century, Catholic missionaries, especially Father Léopold Cadière (1869–1955), observed amidst the country's traditions the most varied forms of worship, which were so closely entwined that all distinctions had faded. This syncretic tendency reappeared forcefully in the religions created during the 20th century. The Missionaries tried to identify the specificities of each belief system and to classify them under three religions: Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. These three religions

were all imported from China or India but were immersed in the omnipresent popular belief system that multiplied the object of worship: national heroes, village tutelary genies, and the spirits of the Four Worlds (Sky, Forest, Earth, Water). Royal authority attempted to control the various forms of worship by ordering investigations into the morality and public utility of spirits, by bestowing certificates authorizing their worship, and by establishing their rank (superior, average or inferior), their rituals and the details of their sacrifices.

Contrary to what one might suppose, atheism—the negation of gods or God—was present in Vietnam long before the introduction of communism, presented in the 1940s as the system of the “three no’s”: no family, no country, no religion, which implies “no God”. However, “no God” does not necessarily mean “no religion”. Before tackling the core subject of the article, let us stop to consider some aspects of atheism.

### 1. On atheism

*Atheism* is a negative concept and therefore relative. There is no absolute negation without an object: a negation with no object is not a negation. We can therefore negate only what has previously been designated. The object negated by atheism is thus simultaneously determined and put into perspective by its negation: that is to say, the gods, or more exactly by the diversity of ideas we entertain about them. In the West, the original polytheistic gods were erased by rational Greek thought and Judeo-Christianity. The latter, with its faith in a single God who transcends the world, desecrated three spheres of life inhabited by innumerable gods: nature, political power<sup>1</sup> and fertility. Thus, subsequently, atheism would be concerned only with a monotheistic God.

In the long Western tradition, many gods were thus rejected, be they those identified as simple representations of human passions, desires and feelings, or those that toyed with human destiny and whose wars had calamitous repercussions on men. Epicurus delivered humans from their fear of the gods. According to him, the gods were content in their own world and not interested in the human world; an indifferent god is akin to a non-existent god. Humans had created powerful and benevolent gods to serve their interest, only to reject them when confronted with evil (Trần, 1993, 1994). Thereafter, rationality would develop in the philosophical, scientific, political and moral domains—rejecting any recourse to religion. At the start of the Modern era, Hugo Grotius envisaged dealing with the question of human rights “*etsi Deus non daretur*” (in practice “as if God did not exist”, and in theory “even if God did not exist”). The separation of politics and religion, advocated by Christianity, paved the way for secularization. While political power ceased to be the secular arm of religious power, it was also deprived of any mystical or religious foundation. It could exist only through force, seduction or democratic discussion.

During the 19th century, Feuerbach affirmed that “theology became anthropology and physiology”; in other words, any discourse on God is in effect a discourse on man (endowed with *intelligence* and *love*) and on nature (endowed with *power* and *eternity*). Others would follow his lead and reject a God that was merely the projection of human desires<sup>2</sup> or, worse (Sartrean philosophy comes to mind), one whose inquiring gaze prevented man from living his life.

These negations, as we have said, are all relative to certain conceptions of the gods or of God. They are in reality the underside of the affirmation of what is believed to be true: man and nature. This brings to mind Marx's equation: Humanism=Naturalism.

As for the word *religion*, it has many meanings. In some cases, as in the West, it designates the ties or the relationship that man maintains with superior beings, divinities or others. In others, as in the Far East, it is the very general sense of *the path to be followed* (*dào* in Chinese) or *the teaching handed down by the Elders or ancestors* (*zongjiao*), with no precise indications of what this *path* or *teaching* may be. Therefore, faith in God or in the gods can be called *religion*, in its more generalized sense of *path* or *teaching*. Nevertheless, there are other *paths* or *teachings* that advocate abstaining from worshipping any gods or divinities, such as certain branches of Buddhism. Thus the word *religion* covers the most divergent beliefs and the most varied practices, with different, and even incompatible, goals.

Atheism therefore does not oppose religions whose beliefs and practices do not concern the relationship between man and God or the gods. In polytheism, as it is impossible to know all the gods, we are inevitably atheists in respect of the gods we neither know nor recognize. There are therefore as many types of atheism as there are conceptions of divinity. We know, for example, that the first Christians, who worshipped a unique and transcendent God but who did not acknowledge the gods of the Roman Empire—including the deified emperor—were considered atheists. Atheism can take various forms, from simple ignorance or indifference to militant opposition<sup>3</sup>.

## 2. A certain form of atheism in traditional Vietnam

Traditionally, Vietnam knows neither a single and transcendental God nor its opposite, a radical atheism. Rather, a multitude of non-exclusive divinities co-exist, products of diverse religions. Vietnamese tolerance has often been extolled; in religious matters, this amounts to plain and simple syncretism in practice, sometimes even the absence of any convictions. Thus, it is not surprising to find Buddhist or Taoist statues in a temple dedicated to the worship of the Four Worlds (Mother Goddess worship). The same holds true for Buddhist pagodas, where statues of divinities of the Four Worlds can be found, or even statues of national heroes, such as busts of President Ho Chi Minh, which have recently started appearing. The current popular belief system is a mixture of religions centred around Buddhism, with no coordination or unification of beliefs and practices and no possibility of establishing the percentage of adherents of each traditional religion. This situation probably stems from the fact that the common people have deified Buddha as well as many bodhisattvas and integrated them into an existing pantheon of spirits and divinities.

In such a context, atheism does not take on the radical, Western, form of “all or nothing”, but rather a more nuanced and relative aspect. Thus the most common form of atheism is ignorance. Indeed, how would it be possible to know all the spirits, genies or divinities stemming from popular religion and the three erudite religions<sup>4</sup>? Furthermore, daily needs can be fulfilled with just a handful

of superior beings. Thus a large number of divinities, spirits and innumerable bodhisattvas are ignored by the general population. Only a limited number are invoked in moments of need. There have been instances where genies, incapable of answering prayers, were demoted and their statues publicly punished, much to the astonishment of Catholic missionaries<sup>5</sup>. This act does not demonstrate utter negation of the existence of divinities but rather illustrates the will to commit these spirits to the service of humanity.

Seventeenth-century missionaries discovered an ambiguous situation in the world of Buddhism. On the one hand, the elite, fond of scholarly theories, knew that the Buddha was not interested in the notion of gods, that he refused the idea of a single and unique God who created the world. The Buddha considered those gods venerated by popular beliefs to be beings belonging to one of the six modes of existence, between which all beings transmigrate in perpetual suffering. He considered the only deliverance possible to be the definitive escape from *samsara*, from this world of birth and rebirth. Nothing could be gained by asking for divine help from gods who could not even save themselves. It was not a question of denying the gods but rather of declaring that they were of no interest.

On the other hand, the popular masses were unconvinced of the need to forsake the world of reincarnations. They were still leaning towards syncretism, requesting favours from superior powers, regardless of their origins. The Buddha and the innumerable buddhas, or bodhisattvas, were transformed into as many omniscient and omnipresent divinities, which were then transformed into a class of divinities among many others. European missionaries, accustomed to the duality of “all or nothing”, considered the situation ambivalent: atheism for the elite and polytheism for the masses.

Taoism seems little known in its philosophical and mystical dimensions; perhaps this is because it advocates a quest for immortality—some call it non-action or even idleness—in places far removed from the tumult of struggles for riches and honours. Contrary to Buddhism or Confucianism, Taoism has never been a State doctrine; it has always remained more discreet. In the city of Hué, the former capital of Central Vietnam, there is only one Taoist temple, the *Linh Hựu Quán*, whereas pagodas and temples to the Goddess Mother abound in every district. Taoism boasts a rich web of rituals and a large pantheon; however, many mistake it for the worship of the Four Worlds. There are often statues of Taoist gods in temples dedicated to the Goddess Mother, the latter considered immortal in the celestial court of the Jade Emperor. Both Taoist and Buddhist monks perform funerary rites; the former are thus often mistaken for their more visible Buddhist counterparts. As for the general population, they consider Taoist monks to be experts in magic and witchcraft. This explains why the Catholic missionaries referred to popular Taoism as the sect of magicians (“*secta veneficorum*”, according to the 18th-century Italian Augustinian missionary Adrianus a sancta Thecla). From this point of view, Taoism is man’s attempt to use occult forces for his own gain.

As for Confucianism, it is above all a humanist doctrine. It teaches us to live as human beings, requiring each of us to practice the five virtues: benevolence (humanity), justice (faithfulness), politeness (urbanity), wisdom (sagacity) and faith (confidence). We must also situate ourselves correctly within the five social relationships: sovereign and subject, father (mother) and child, husband and wife,

between brothers (sisters) and amongst friends. Thus, adepts of different religions, Christians included, obey the precepts of Confucian humanism as a basis for co-existence. There is a hierarchy of modes of worship to respect: in the public realm, the king offers sacrifices to the Sky, whereas mandarins offer theirs to the genies of the mountains and the rivers; in private, individuals honour the spirits of their ancestors. However, in answer to the ultimate questions posited in the different religions, Confucius adopts a cautious attitude. His definition of wisdom is to give men their due in all fairness and to honour spirits and demons while keeping them at a distance (Lun Yü VI: 20). He refrains from answering the question of how to serve spirits, wondering instead how we can serve spirits if we do not yet know how to serve men. He similarly eludes the question of death; for until we know life, how can we know what death is (Lun Yü XI: 11)?

### 3. An atheism rooted in the West

The arrival of Christianity during the 17th century barely changed moral and social life for the newly converted; their daily interactions with non-Christians continued as before. On a religious level, however, things were different.

Non-Christians quickly realized that Christians were refusing to participate in the worship of the tutelary genies that protected their village. At first, the community was happy to leave these “irreligious” alone and to request a simple financial contribution. However, certain rigorous missionaries forbade this practice as well and the Christians were then denounced to provincial authorities, leading to sanctions and persecutions. At a higher level, they were accused of impiety, of having rejected the fundamental social ties: faithfulness to the king and filial piety for one’s parents. As early as the 17th century, Christians were already defending themselves with two arguments. Firstly, they deemed their duties to their parents to have been fulfilled, both during their lifetime and after their deaths, but according to different rituals; traditional rituals included superstitious elements, contrary to their new faith. Secondly, as subjects, they continued to offer all the honours and duties to their king but they no longer considered him to be an absolute being, for the king himself gave homage to a mightier being, the Sky. These new Vietnamese Christians believed the Sky was none other than the Lord of the Heavens (Trần, 2002). Certain individuals, including scholars, found these arguments convincing and a certain number converted to Christianity. Others, however, did not understand them. Traditional society was confronted with a completely new concept by this Western religion: faith in a single and unique God, creator of the universe.

The first commandment, “You will worship only one God”, implies that no other spirit, genie, rural divinity nor human being, including the founders of the three traditional religions, can be God and therefore none deserve the honour of being worshipped. Faced with the “True God of Heaven and Earth” (*Thiên địa chân Chúa* or *Thiên Chúa*), we must renounce all false gods. This radical position did not exist in polytheism.

This non-comprehension may in part have stemmed from a linguistic issue. It is indeed difficult to find a religious vocabulary to talk of a unique and transcendental God when the only words available are adapted to divinities and

superior beings immanent in this world. An example is the use of the Vietnamese word “*thờ*”, which designates the attitude to adopt towards not only divinities, genies and spirits, but also towards the deceased, such as national heroes, ancestor spirits and living beings such as the king, one’s teacher and one’s parents. It is said that a widow renounces remarriage due to “*thờ*” for her deceased husband. Depending on the context, the word can mean several things: respect, veneration, adoration, etc. Therefore, if we accept only one definition, “adoration”, and reserve it exclusively for the unique Christian God, *Thiên Chúa*, it follows that it is forbidden to use “*thờ*” for any other being. The famous “Chinese rites controversy” at the beginning of the 18th century in China and Vietnam centred precisely on the rituals of “*thờ*” towards Confucius and ancestors, rituals forbidden to Christians until the 20th century, when the Catholic Church began to understand that the rituals to honour Confucius and ancestors were civil and not religious in nature. It is clear that before the lifting of this ban, Christians were considered irreligious “atheists” in terms of all the traditional spirits and genies excluded from “*thờ*”.

Catholic missionaries were not the only Europeans in Vietnam. Merchants and military personnel also arrived; but their behaviour was not always an example of morality and piety. The missionaries considered their conduct deplorable because it was close to practical atheism.

Then began efforts to colonize the country. First, the French expeditionary corps landed, quickly followed by colonial administrators. There were certainly practising Christians amongst them, but the political regime, not long after the French Revolution, was oriented towards anticlericalism. Several authorities, immersed in the spirit of the Enlightenment, were openly anti-religious. After the collapse of the old order, this Western mindset may have influenced a certain number of Vietnamese open to modernity. However, the colonial administrators, while maintaining their fundamental secularism, were obliged in practice to take into account diverse beliefs—not only those of the Catholic minority.

Finally, the Marxists appeared, linking their patriotic struggle to liberate Vietnam with an anti-religious struggle inherited from Western tradition. It is beyond the scope of this article to outline this movement’s tumultuous history, one that is still unfolding today. Suffice it to say that its anti-religious strategy had to be adapted to allow for the collaboration of the faithful whose patriotism, morality and solidarity were beyond doubt.

#### **4. Further thoughts**

In Vietnam, as everywhere else, even the most radical and active forms of atheism remain fundamentally relative to concepts of God or the gods. Thus, if these concepts change, or prove to be wrong, tactical adjustments are possible, especially now that the danger to the homeland no longer seems to come from a neo-colonialist West but rather from the Big Brother to the north, a neighbour still longing for its Middle Empire. On the other hand, as we have already seen, atheism as a negation of God is the flip side of humanism, that is to say of the affirmation of man and nature, the humanization of nature and the naturalization of man; Marx applauded the idea that hereafter the Supreme Being (God) for man was man.

Finally, let us highlight two remarks that deserve further reflection. The first is by a Russian philosopher well versed in the Stalin regime, Nicolas Berdiaev (1874–1948), who stated that if God does not exist, then man is entirely dependent on nature and society, on the world and on the State (Berdiaev, 1958: 222)<sup>6</sup>, or, we may add, dependent on those who identify with the State. The second remark is Marx’s phrase: “man is the Supreme Being for man”—a statement fraught with ambiguity. Experience has proven that in practice the status of the first “man” (the government or party) is not the same as that of the second “man” (the ordinary citizen).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>. This made the separation of temporal and religious powers possible in theory and the establishment of secularism possible in practice.

<sup>2</sup>. According to E. von Hartmann (1900), it is not because God is the object of our desires that he must necessarily exist. But it is not because he is the object of our desires that he should not exist either. That the gods are the object of our desires implies neither their existence nor their non-existence.

<sup>3</sup>. In his Doctoral dissertation of 1841, Marx adopts a statement attributed by Aeschylus to Prometheus: “In a word, I hate all gods” (translation from *Marx–Engels Collected Works* (1975)).

<sup>4</sup>. In practice, the Important Bodhisattvas are gods for Buddhists, objects of their devotion. Bruno Dagens (1999) states that the “invention” of the Important Bodhisattva is in a sense a response to the success of the main gods of a Theist Hinduism, Vishnu and Shiva ... Certain Bodhisattvas are indeed nothing more than “buddhified” gods.

<sup>5</sup>. See Association de la Propagation de la Foi (1826: 168): “*Le roi, touché par la misère publique, ... a même ordonné des prières. ... À l’arrivée de chacun de ces dieux, les préfets leur offroient des sacrifices pendant trois jours. ... Il n’est point tombé de pluie, et tous les pauvres Thâns [génies] ont reçu des coups de rotin, et ont été abandonnés ignominieusement*”. (The king, touched by the public’s suffering, ... even ordered prayers. ... The prefects offered three days of sacrifices for the arrival of each of the gods. ... No rain fell and all the poor Thâns [genies] were caned and ignominiously abandoned.”)

<sup>6</sup>. On the subject, also consult Gesché and Scolas (2002).

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