

# CHANGES IN THE RELIGIOUS LIVES OF ETHNIC MINORITIES IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS OF VIETNAM

## CAMBIOS EN LA VIDA RELIGIOSA DE LAS MINORÍAS ÉTNICAS EN LAS TIERRAS ALTAS CENTRALES DE VIETNAM

Van Loi, Le

 **Le Van Loi** levanloinpa@yahoo.com  
Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, Vietnam

**Revista de Investigaciones Universidad del Quindío**  
Universidad del Quindío, Colombia  
ISSN: 1794-631X  
ISSN-e: 2500-5782  
Periodicity: Anual  
vol. 34, no. 1, 2022  
riuq@uniquindio.edu.co

Received: 12 August 2021  
Accepted: 11 January 2022

URL: <http://portal.amelica.org/ameli/journal/517/5173110014/>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33975/riuq.vol34n1.852>

**Abstract:** Religious changes are an unavoidable part of social life that follows the progression of social history. The religious lives of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands are changing in a variety of ways and at various levels. This article uses analytical and synthetic research methodologies to examine the following aspects of the ethnic minorities' religious lives in the Central Highlands: the significant shift from polytheism to monotheism and religious diversity; transformation of religious beliefs and practices; transformation of ecclesiastical institutions and communities in religions. Thereby, the face of beliefs and religious lives, as well as the impact of religious transformation on the lives of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands of Vietnam today has been clarified.

**Keywords:** Religious changes, ethnic minorities, Central Highlands, Vietnam.

**Resumen:** Los cambios religiosos son una parte inevitable de la vida social que sigue la progresión de la historia social. Las vidas religiosas de las minorías étnicas en las tierras altas centrales están cambiando en una variedad de formas y en varios niveles. Este artículo utiliza metodologías de investigación analítica y sintética para examinar los siguientes aspectos de la vida religiosa de las minorías étnicas en las tierras altas centrales: el cambio significativo del politeísmo al monoteísmo y la diversidad religiosa; transformación de creencias y prácticas religiosas; transformación de las instituciones y comunidades eclesiásticas en religiones. De este modo, se ha aclarado el rostro de las creencias y la vida religiosa, así como el impacto de la transformación religiosa en la vida de las minorías étnicas en las tierras altas centrales de Vietnam en la actualidad.

**Palabras clave:** cambios religiosos, minorías étnicas, tierras altas centrales, Vietnam.

## INTRODUCTION

Religious changes are an unavoidable part of social life that follows the progression of social history. Religion is a unique social entity that consists of core religious ideas, religious ceremonial practices, and community cohesion among people who share the same religious beliefs, all of which contribute to the religion's long-term viability. Because each religious institution is a part of a larger social institution, religions change as history and social change in the historical process.

The Central Highlands region of Vietnam is divided into five provinces: Kon Tum, Gia Lai, Dak Lak, Dak Nong, and Lam Dong, with a total natural area of 54,477 km<sup>2</sup> (16.8% of the country's total area) and a population of roughly 5 million people. The ethnic minorities of the Central Highlands, primarily the Gia Rai, Ede, and Ba Na, Co Ho ethnic groups, make for 15.6 percent of the country's total ethnic minorities (equal to 2.2 million people). (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2019) There are currently 49/54 ethnic groups living together in the Central Highlands, including 12 local ethnic groups and 37 ethnic groups from neighboring regions. In the Central Highlands, ethnic populations are generally housed in villages and hamlets. There are disparities in socio-economic development among ethnic groups, as well as differences in languages, cultures, and beliefs.

The Central Highlands is an area with many types of religions, in which the religions with a large number of believers are Catholicism, Buddhism, Protestantism, and Cao Dai. In the Central Highlands, there are 1,753,761 religious' believers (representing 34.7 percent of the population), about 3,500 religious' practitioners, and about 840 places of worship. In recent years, the number of religious believers in the Central Highlands has risen quickly, with ethnic minority believers in two religions, Catholicism and Protestantism, growing rapidly. There are 844,192 Catholics, 329,791 of whom are ethnic minority believers; and 410,578 Protestants, 378,140 of whom are ethnic minority believers. There are, however, 576,288 Buddhists and 20,555 Cao Dai believers, most of whom are the Kinh people. The ethnic communities in Vietnam's Central Highlands not only hold traditional beliefs but also practice most of the country's major religions. (Nguyen, 2017b) Furthermore, in recent years, many new religious phenomena have appeared with different origins, scope and content of activities, influence levels as well as development trends in the Central Highlands region. (Nguyen, 2016).

There have been several types of research on various aspects of the religious lives of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands up to this point. A number of works have been noted in relation to the changes in religious lives and beliefs of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands, such as *The Challenge to Catholicism through the "Charismatic Renewal" Phenomenon and "Ha Mon" Religion in the Centre Highlands at Present* of the author Nguyen Phu Loi, (Nguyen, 2014 a) *Identification of changing trends in religious lives in the Central Highlands at present* of the author Pham Quynh Phuong, (Pham, 2015) *Religious issues with sustainable development in the Central Highlands* of the author Chu Van Tuan, (Chu, 2014) *New Religious Phenomena of Ethnic Minorities in the Central Highlands at Present* of the author Nguyen Van Minh,

(Nguyen, 2017 a), etc. In summary, the studies show that religious lives among ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands have changed dramatically in recent years and present themselves in a variety of forms and levels. The article focuses on defining changes in the religious lives of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands in different aspects, using research results from earlier scientists and analytical and synthetic research: the significant shift from polytheism to monotheism and religious diversity; transformation of religious beliefs and practices; transformation of ecclesiastical institutions and religious communities of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands.

## **RESEARCH RESULTS**

A significant shift from traditional polytheism to monotheism and religious diversity

Religious diversity has emerged in the Central Highlands as a result of significant shifts in religious conversion and transformation movements among ethnic minority communities. Certain ethnic minority communities in the Central Highlands region abandoned their traditional religions and beliefs to follow Catholicism in the mid-nineteenth century (1849), Buddhism in the early twentieth century, and Protestantism in the early 1930s. The evolution of the following religions, as well as the creation of many new religious occurrences, demonstrates the religious variety among ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands.

Buddhism was introduced to the Central Highlands at the turn of the twentieth century, and it was mostly conveyed to the Kinh community residing there. After the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha was established in 1981, it quickly determined faith propagation into remote areas and ethnic minority areas. Superior Buddhist monk Thien Chau traveled from Saigon to Kon Tum around 1964 to organize refuge for approximately 200 Gia Rai people in Weh village, Ya Chim commune, Kon Tum province. However, missionary work in Central Highlands ethnic minority communities has been slow and arduous. (Pham, 2015) The spread of Buddhism into ethnic minority communities in the Central Highlands has been more orderly over the last 20 years (since the 2000s).

Buddhism developed in the ethnic minority communities in the Central Highlands very late, however, it has also achieved certain results. Among the ethnic minorities who practice Buddhism are the Gia Rai people, a small number of Ba Na people in Kom Tum and Gia Lai provinces, the Ede people in Dak Lak and Dak Nong provinces, and the Co Ho people in Lam Dong province. Before 2003, there were no Buddhists among the ethnic minorities of Kom Tum province. However, on April 19, 2009, the Buddhist Administration Board of Kom Tum province, in collaboration with the Central Buddhist Guidance Board, held the Central Highlands' largest refuge ceremony for the ethnic minorities at Bai Ai pagoda in Kom Tum city, with nearly 4,000 Buddhists, the majority of whom were ethnic minorities with nearly 3,500 people. (Le, 2013) At Phu Cuong monastery in Gia Lai province, Superior Buddhist monk Thich Giac Duyen (Mendicant Buddhism) led over 1,000 Gia Rai and Bana people from two Chu Se and Chu Puh districts to become Buddhists. Most people in some villages, including Hlu, Koai, Teng Nong, and Kueng Don, are Buddhists

now. Buddhism group in Gia Lai built Ngoc Dong monastery for ethnic minority Buddhists in Lab Lang commune, Chu Se district. In addition, in Buu Tinh pagoda in Auyn Pa town, about 200 ethnic minority Buddhists participate in religious events. Buddhists are the ethnic minority believers in Dak Lak province, primarily the Ede people in Cu M'gar district, the Dao people in Iak district, and the M'ngong people in Iak district. The Quang Trach pagoda in Cu M'gar district is where ethnic minorities' religious activities are focused. Furthermore, because pagodas have yet to be completed in some areas, ethnic minority Buddhists are forced to rent dwellings from locals in order to focus on religious activities. In Gung Re hamlet, Di Linh district, Lam Dong province, there were roughly 1,644 Co Ho Buddhists in 2002. By 2009, the number of ethnic minority Buddhists had risen to 6,000 individuals (Nguyen, 2010) and by 2014, it had risen to almost 7,000 people, accounting for around 2% of Buddhists in Lam Dong province. In 2009, there were 9,594 Buddhist ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands, out of a total of 570,274 Buddhists in the region (accounting for 1.6%). (Bui, 2012, p.77) In the Central Highlands, there were 14,716 ethnic minority Buddhists by the end of 2016. In total, 687 ethnic minority Buddhists from Kon Tum province, 650 from Gia Lai province, 5,000 from Dak Lak province, 1,379 from Dak Nong province, and 7,000 from Lam Dong province were present. (Bui, 2017, p.77).

Protestantism has spread to ethnic minorities such as Co Ho, E De, M'ngong, Gia Rai, and others in Dak Lak and Lam Dong provinces in the Central Highlands since the 1930s. Due to the restrictive policy of the French colonialists and the limitations of contemporary missionary forces and funds, Protestant missionary activities did not produce many results in the early period. Protestantism had reached several ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands and South Truong Son by 1942, thanks to the efforts of foreign missionary couples. (Vu, 2018, p.81-82) Between 1954 and 1975, Protestant missionary efforts in ethnic minority areas of the Central Highlands were boosted. With the active and effective assistance of foreign Protestant organizations, the emergence of the second generation of well-trained missionaries and the missionary participation of missionaries - experts from the Summer Institute of Linguistics-SLL in the study of languages, writing and printing of the Bible for 22 ethnic minorities in the Truong Son and Central Highlands regions, there were many ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands region who joined Protestantism during this period. The number of ethnic minority believers in the Central Highlands region has been growing. As of 1973, there were roughly 55,000 Protestant ethnic minority believers in the Central Highlands region (primarily three organizations: CMA, Evangelical Church of Vietnam/South, and Missionary Christianity), of whom about 15,000 were baptized. (Vu, 2018, p. 85) Co Ho people make up a large percentage of the Protestant ethnic minority (26.92%), whereas Bana people make up the smallest amount (1.12 percent),... (Do, 1994, p. 146) Since 1975, authorities at all levels have implemented strict management measures for Protestant activities in the Central Highlands, Protestant church organizations have been disbanded and believers have engaged in religious activities at home for a variety of objective and subjective reasons, including the involvement of a number of dignitaries and believers with FULRO. The movement to evangelize and follow Protestantism in ethnic minority areas

in the Central Highlands reached a pinnacle between the late 1980s and the late 1990s. In early 2017, over 550,000 ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands have converted to Protestantism, a tenfold increase compared to 1973. (Nguyen, 2019).

Thus, the religious conversion and transformation of a portion of the ethnic minority community in the Central Highlands is the most significant change in an ethnic minority religion. New religious-ethnic (lineage) communities have emerged as a result of religious conversion and transformation. These are religiously based ethnic communities regulated by religious beliefs, doctrines, and norms. Many new variables have emerged as a result of the entrance and development of faiths in ethnic minority areas, making religious and ethnic concerns, as well as religious and ethnic affairs, increasingly intertwined. Many ethnic groups in the Central Highlands are increasingly concerned about religious and ethnic issues.

The ethnic minorities' traditional values have been influenced by the creation of religious-ethnic communities here. In which religious values have been promoted and dominated ethnic (lineage) values, religious culture and lifestyle have overwhelmed and dominated ethnic culture and lifestyle. Furthermore, where religion is developed, the position, role, and prestige of a clergyman and monk of various religions rise to the point where they eclipse the role and prestige of a village elder and family leader.

#### *Transformation of religious beliefs and religious ritual practices*

In the Central Highlands' ethnic minority communities, religious beliefs and religious ceremonial practices are changing rapidly, dramatically, decisively, and vibrantly. The transformation is a nearly complete change in religious beliefs and religious ritual practices, to the point where some believers are willing to leave the old community to join the new, giving up almost complete faith in sacred symbols and traditional religious ritual practices in order to form a new community that is distinct from the old and at times even willing to conflict with the old community to protect new religious beliefs. (Nguyen, 2014 b) Some ethnic minority communities have given up their belief in gods in traditional beliefs of the Central Highlands such as Yang gong, River deity, Mountain deity, Forest deity, etc. to come to God, Buddha,... to pray for salvation, protection and trust in these subjects. Simultaneously, many Ede and Mnong people in the Central Highlands region abandon some ancient religious rites and customs in honor of the community's original deities. Instead, people visit Catholic and Protestant churches to participate in ceremonies such as making holy signs, singing hymns, and receiving sacraments, among other things.

Buddhism has recently developed among ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands, with the number of believers steadily increasing. In the Central Highlands, Buddhism established a number of ashrams for the Co Ho people at Thanh Son pagoda in Di Linh town, Di Linh district, Lam Dong province. Various little monks, little nuns who are children of ethnic minorities' families, have been reared in some pagodas in the Central Highlands region. Buddha pictures have been adored in the homes of many Buddhist households from ethnic minorities. Some Buddhists from ethnic minorities have gone

vegetarian and chanted Buddhist chants at home. Initially, Buddhism in the Central Highlands region organized ritual events related to ethnic minority communities' traditional cultural practices. For example, during Vesak in 2019, Ede Buddhists in Cu M'gar district, Dak Lak province, dressed in traditional garb, carried a procession of newborn Shakyamuni Buddha, which was followed by a herd of elephants going along the front, as well as monks marching to celebrate Vesak. In the Central Highlands, this action is seen as a turning point in Buddhist activities. The Buddhist ethnic minority community in the Central Highlands, on the other hand, is still a small one. There are just a few Buddhist pagodas in the Central Highlands such as Ngoc Dong Vihara in Lab Lang commune, Chu Se district, Gia Lai, which also has a Board of Deacons of Gia Rai people. Furthermore, many Buddhists do not fully comply with Buddhist precepts, such as not knowing how to utilize a pocket recitation machine (to listen to Buddhist books of prayers) or rosary beads after taking refuge. Most ethnic minority communities do not understand Buddhist scriptures, do not practice vegetarianism, do not willingly visit pagodas, and do not sing Buddhist chants on the full moon and the first day of the month. The content of Buddhist teachings is highly abstract and difficult to understand for people with specialized thinking, which is one of the reasons why Buddhism has not yet developed in many ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. Furthermore, many ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands do not speak Mandarin, and only a few monks speak ethnic minorities' languages. The scriptures and lectures are written in the national language, many monks are not enthusiastic and hard-working when performing faith propagation in remote areas, ethnic minority areas, etc. (Thich, 2014) At the same time, there is no local ethnic minority monk preaching and praying for the ethnic communities in the Central Highlands region of Buddhism. The Vietnam Buddhist Sangha's Department of Faith Propagation and Department of Ceremonies do not yet have translations of Buddhist scriptures for ethnic minorities, hence faith propagation is fraught with challenges, etc. Buddhism in the Central Highlands region is currently attempting to revitalize and spread its impact through a variety of active forms and modes of activities in order to strengthen faith among the ethnic minority community.

The Bana people of the Ro Ngao branch, the Gia rai people, and the Xo Dang people were the first to convert to Catholicism. Initially, Catholic parishes and chapelries in ethnic minority districts lacked a site of worship, and parishioners performed rituals at the commodity's Nha Rong (Communal House). Parishioners built a tiny home next to the Nha Rong (Communal House) to hold the Blessed Sacrament. The Blessed Sacrament is taken to the Nha Rong (Communal House) when Mass is held or when parishioners come to pray, then it is returned to the tiny house when Mass is over. The Catholic institution in the Central Highlands has gradually developed and perfected since 2000, thanks to the efforts of the Catholic Church, contributing to the consolidation of religious beliefs and practices among ethnic minority believers. Dioceses in the Central Highlands, such as Kon Tum Diocese, have overcome the problem of having one priest serving in several parishes at the same time. Currently, all parishes have a priest in charge, and certain parishes, like Plei Chet's, have up to three priests. The Giao Phu has been resurrected and is being

prepared to return to the village and serve as the heart and soul of the Pastoral Council, Board of Jobs. Dioceses in the Central Highlands simultaneously established the Parish Pastoral Council and consolidated personnel, restored the old association and established a new association. Each parish typically has ten different sorts of associations, which, while smaller than parishes in the plains, are extremely active. Furthermore, the return to religious convictions of a portion of ethnic minority parishioners in remote parishes and chapelries has resulted in more organized and orderly religious activities among Catholic ethnic minorities. Currently, Catholic ethnic minority believers are mainly the Bana people in Kon Tum province, the Gia Rai people in Gia Lai province, the Ede people, the Mnong people, the Xo Dang people in Dak Lak province and Dak Nong province and the Co ho, Ma and Chu Ru people in Lam Dong province. Catholicism had 391,385 believers in the Central Highlands provinces at the end of 2016, with 134,232 believers in Kom Tum province, 53,149 believers in Gia Lai province, 56,114 believers in Dak Lak province, 19,155 believers in Dak Nong province, and 128,735 believers in Lam Dong province. (Central Highlands Steering Committee, Department of Ethnic Minorities and Religious Affairs, 2016) Which, the number of ethnic minority believers who believe in the God is 47.06%, those who believe in Heaven is 81.05%, who believe in the existence of hell is 90.2%, who believe in living a gentle life will be protected by God is 88.89% and who believe that if they live wickedly, they will be punished is 88.89%. (Hoang, 2020) When it comes to religious rites, 81.7% of ethnic minority believers read prayers on a weekly basis, 52.94% attend church weekly, 51.3% listen to Bible lectures at church, and 82.35% believe that attending church is necessary to receive the Supreme Being's protection. (Hoang, 2020).

Since the 1980s of the twentieth century, the number of ethnic minorities who are Protestant believers has significantly expanded, forming religious activity groups and from those groups forming grassroots branches and churches. Following their formation, the grassroots branches and churches actively built and rebuilt churches, as well as sent people to the Alliance Evangelical Divinity School for theological studies. As of the end of 2018, in the Central Highlands, there were 18 Protestant ethnic minority communities with about 450,000 believers, including the Ede people (133,593 believers), the Gia Rai people (82,604 believers), the Ba Na people (35,309 believers), the Co Ho people (74,864 believers), Mnong people (23,284 believers), the Xe Dang people (6,473 believers), the Van Kieu people, the Ma people, the Hmong people, the H'Lang people, the Gie Trying people, the Dao people, the Nung people, the Tay people, the San Chi people, the Cham people, the S'Tieng people, the Thai people. In this area, there are currently around 30 Protestant organizations and denominations, 1,665 groups (including 1,300 registered groups), 300 branches, and 120 churches and chapels. (Nguyen, 2020) Protestant religious group points are largely stable, while ethnic minority adherents' religious convictions are becoming increasingly entrenched. 76.39% percent of ethnic minority believers believe in God, 76.39% believe in Heaven, 86.11% believe in the existence of hell, 83.33% believe that living a peaceful life will protect them, and 83.33% believe that living cruelly will punish them. In the practice of religious ceremonies, a portion of ethnic minorities has a good comprehension of religious doctrines, and norms, as well as being highly adept at performing them. Mass is held

regularly on Sundays and communion is held on the first Sunday of the month, and people who reach adulthood are baptized in a baptismal service. Protestant ceremonies are used for weddings and funerals in ethnic groupings. Some groups collect believers by age and organize consistent activities; some organize activities weekly on Thursdays, while others organize activities on Sundays following Mass. (Doan, 2018) Currently, 76.39% of believers read prayers at home daily, 40.28% go to Mass weekly, 40.28% listen to Bible lectures weekly, 83.33% go to Mass because they wish to be protected by the Supreme Being, 30.56% go to Mass for duty, and 44.44% go to Mass to pray for themselves and their families to be blessed with fortune, 79.17% go to Mass to pray for their own and their families health, 79.36% pray for their families work to be smooth. (Hoang, 2020) However, there is a phenomenon of sectarianism in Protestantism's religious life. Some Protestant denominations can entice believers from other denominations, and when conflicts arise within a denomination, pastors in charge or members of the Board of Deacons frequently pull a segment of the faithful to form their own branch or church, causing internal confusion, disunity, and jeopardizing national unity...

Ethnic populations in the Central Highlands have experienced changes in their religious beliefs and religious ritual practices as they transitioned from polytheism to monotheism. Instead of believing in animistic things, Catholics and Protestants put their faith in God, in heaven, in hell, and in life that will be judged after death; Buddhists believe in Buddha and the world of nirvana, as well as hell according to the concept of Buddhism. People progressively created a new way of life from the non-converted population by abandoning numerous conventional religious ceremonies in order to practice the religious rites they followed. Ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands see changes in their social lives as a result of changes in religious beliefs and religious ceremonial practices.

#### *Transformation of ecclesiastical institutions and communities in religions*

When Catholicism first arrived in the Central Highlands, parishes and chapelries were founded, separating the populace from ancient settlements and establishing new villages. Because all of the residents of the newly constituted village are parishioners, the parish and religious institutions cover the newly established village institutions. Later, the missionary activity was successful, and the priests did not construct new communities, instead visiting each one to evangelize. This type of hamlet combines the religious and secular institutions in various forms. Since the beginning, Catholic missionary activities in the Bana ethnic minority have resulted in the formation of new Catholic villages that are distinct from the original villages. The Church Fathers play a significant role in these Catholic villages. The Church Fathers, together with the missionary priests, sustain Catholic religious activities, and they also hold positions in the community's traditional institutions, with many of them serving as the village elder in charge of village affairs at the same time. Recognizing the importance of the Church Fathers, the Catholic Church has intensified their training in recent years. By 2003, the Kon Tum diocese had approximately 1,000 Church Fathers, including about 700 in Kon Tum province and roughly 300 in Gia Lai province. By 2006, the number of the church Fathers in the Kon Tum Diocese had

risen to 1,210; in 2013, there were 2,006; in 2014, there were 2,020; and in 2015, there were 2,052. (Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam, 2016, p. 767) The majority of the Church Fathers are young people with educational qualifications, a basic understanding of Catholicism, computer skills, and a good understanding of their socioeconomic circumstances. Many communities in the Gia Rai ethnic group have converted to Catholicism, but there are few priests, thus Redemptorist monks and priests of the Order have picked capable parishioners known as Ko khul to assist them. A Ko khul is commonly found in each village of the Catholic Gia Rai ethnic group. In each Gia Rai ethnic community, the Ko khul organization currently has both religious and secular positions. Village elders nominate some Ko khul members as village elders, and they participate in village-level socio-political groups. The Co Ho ethnic group in the Da Lat Diocese has developed communities with a population of mostly parishioners among the Ede and Mnong ethnic groups in the Buon Ma Thuot Diocese. Religious institutions and traditional village institutions coexist in these villages. The religious church's staff are in charge of the village institution, which has an impact on the community's economic, cultural, and social life.

From 2000 up to now, dioceses in the Central Highlands region have established the Parish Pastoral Council and have different names in terms of organization, some positions in the Parish Pastoral Council in the locality. Some parishes still refer to the Pastoral Council as the Board of Jobs. The institution of Catholic villages in the Central Highlands is increasingly loose, the roles of the Church Fathers, of Ko khul, of members of the Parish Pastoral Council, and the Board of Jobs are enhanced. The establishment of a Catholic association and the consolidation of grassroots church organizations have brought believers of all ages and professions together for a range of activities. So far, the Central Highlands dioceses have been able to solve the issue of parishes without pastors. In some ethnic minority parishes, there are two or three priests. Some parishes have a priest to manage in order to assist with the believers' religious and secular lives.

Protestant missionaries began to directly evangelize in existing villages and organize Protestant groups from the beginning of missioning to ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. When a particular number of group points are reached, missionaries form a basic religious unit known as a Branch or a Grassroots Church. The Grassroots Church is classified into two categories: Self-Sufficient (financially capable) Church and Non-Self-Sufficient (financially incapable) Church. The Grassroots Churches all take village names for the Churches such as Bon Rom Branch in Duc Trong commune, Lam Dong province. The Superintendent (typically the pastor) and the Board of Deacons (whose denomination is called the Executive Committee) are in charge of the Grassroots Church. (Charter of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam, 2013) The Deacon is a sacred post that is elected by secret ballot by the members. The Board of Deacons, also known as the Board of Church Deacons, serves as the church's administrator and, in collaboration with the Buddhist Administration Board, oversees the church's operations, handles finances, and has the authority to save or invite superintendents. The taking of the village area and the naming of the village for the Church creates the existence of two institutions, the religious institution and the village institution. Some ethnic minority villages in the

Central Highlands are all Protestant believers, the Board of Deacons plays an important role in both religious and secular affairs, so the superintendents often choose believers who are both virtuous and capable.

Protestantism has trained ethnic minority pastors and missionaries in order for missionary activities to be highly effective in a short period of time. As a result, the number of pastors and missionaries is steadily increasing, with many families having two generations of pastors. Currently, ethnic minorities serve as pastors and missionaries in the majority of Protestant denominations and grassroots churches. Superintendents are members of the same ethnic group who are familiar with the ethnic group's customs, habits, and psychology and are in charge of celebrating Mass in the ethnic language. The superintendents, in collaboration with the Board of Deacons, look after both religious and earthly matters for believers, such as bringing science and technology into cultivation, selecting crops that are suitable for the soil, securing bank loans for believers to expand production, and managing product outsourcing contracts. etc. such as Bon Rom Protestant Branch in N<sup>o</sup>Thot Ha commune, Duc Trong district, Lam Dong province. (Hoang, 2020) By assisting people in finding productive work and improving their financial situation, believers have been able to contribute one-tenth of their income to the Grassroots Church. The provision of salary for the superintendents and the functioning of the Grassroots Church has been facilitated since then, and the community has praised the superintendents' and Board of Deacons' duties.

The movement of various ethnic minorities from the north to the Central Highlands, particularly the Hmong, resulted in a shift in religious organizations and communities in the region. The majority of Hmong from the northern mountainous region moved to the Central Highlands, where Protestantism is the community's glue. According to some Hmong, there is only God's house and ethnic relations in the community, and everyone in the community is God's kid. Meanwhile, a portion of the Hmong who practice Protestantism maintains family ties. They resided in areas with a few to more than a dozen houses and formed Protestant groups based on ethnic communities or families when they moved to the Central Highlands. The Protestant Hmong community's group points in the two provinces of Dak Lak and Dak Nong are arranged into three levels. The first level has a pastor or missionary who is the head and is in charge of the overall responsibility, as well as two vice group leaders who serve as assistants to the pastor. A secretary and a treasurer make up the second level. The board of deacons, which includes youth, women, teenagers, children, and newborns, is the third level. The personnel of the Hmong Protestant groups is mostly at the second level. Pastor Ma Seo Din, who is also the Vice President of the Presbyterian Evangelical Church of Vietnam, leads the Hmong organization in the Presbyterian Evangelical Church of Vietnam, overseeing both the Presbyterian Protestant group in Sin Chai village, Dak Ngo commune, Dak Nong province, and the Hmong Presbyterian Protestant group points across the country. (Doan, 2018, p. 76-78) Because all believers, secretaries, treasurers, and deacons in the group points come from the same family or ethnicity, the positions in the group points play an essential role in both religious and secular matters.

In recent decades, Buddhism, Catholicism, and Protestantism have all increased their evangelization and development in ethnic minority communities in the Central Highlands, and have rapidly extended their influence to varying degrees. In fact, according to the characteristics and strengths of each faith, each religion has chosen its own path into the ethnic minority territory. Catholicism, in particular, strives to strengthen the contingent of dignitaries with knowledge and qualifications for missionary work, officials, disseminate scriptures, preach in ethnic minority languages, adapt and integrate with traditional cultures of ethnic groups to transmit doctrine, expand material facilities to develop believers, form missionaries from which to spread influence, develop theological foundations basically serving the mission, creating new communities with Catholic values and different changes compared to the old community. Protestantism has a diversity of denominations, associated with missionary activities with foreign elements, at the same time, it also strengthens the training of missionaries, printing scriptures, developing group points and especially forming religious communities - ethnic groups that share Protestant beliefs. Buddhism also strives to evangelize ethnic minorities, focuses on building large-scale pagodas in ethnic minority areas, organizes Buddhist communication forms and forms of developing believers in ethnic minority areas, increasing the relationship between Buddhist dignitaries, the government and business leaders to develop believers. Faced with the growing influence of religions, a portion of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands abandoned traditional religious activities to choose for themselves completely new but quite strange compared to the traditional ones. A part of the ethnic minorities selected to follow a religious belief and practice religious rituals but still retain some traditional beliefs, customs and practices. A small part after a while that gave up traditional beliefs to come to believe in one religion changed their beliefs to another religion or returned to traditional beliefs. The already various religious lives and beliefs have become even more diverse and richer as a result of these changes.

## CONCLUSION

Along with the process of national renewal and international integration of Vietnam (since 1986), the religious lives and beliefs of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands have changed rapidly. The shift from polytheism to monotheism and religious diversity, the changes in religious beliefs and religious ritual practices, and the changes in ecclesiastical institutions and ethnic communities are the most visible developments. Ethnic-religious communities have emerged as a result of changes in ethnic minorities' religious lives and beliefs, in which religious and ethnic aspects are mingled together, and in many cases, religious factors predominate over ethnic elements. Simultaneously, contributing to the transformation of ethnic minorities' family, clan, and community relations. Religious people have had the opportunity to access new concepts, broaden exchange and learning, gain knowledge and understanding, and apply them to their daily lives as a result of the emergence and growth of world religions. Simultaneously, contributing to the development of a new way of life for ethnic minorities with many progressive and civilized characteristics, as well as bringing new values to the Central Highlands' culture. However, the

changes in the religious lives and beliefs of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands offer numerous difficulties to the preservation of ethnic cultural identity, stability and national unity.

## REFERENCES

- Bui, M.D. (2011). Situation of Central Highlands development and some sustainable development issues, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi.
- Bui, M.D. (2012). Some basic issues of the Central Highlands society in sustainable development, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi.
- Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam. (2016). Catholic Church of Vietnam, Yearbook 2016, Religious Publishing House, Hanoi.
- Charter of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North), 2013.
- Chu, V.T. (2014). Religious issues with sustainable development in the Central Highlands, State-level scientific project, Institute for Religious Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Hanoi.
- Central Highlands Steering Committee, Department of Ethnic Minorities and Religious Affairs. (2016). Summary of the number of religious believers in the Central Highlands region by religion and ethnic minority people by religion (as of November 2016), Buon Ma Thuot City, December 9 (2016).
- Doan, D.P. (2018). Religious life of Hmong Protestants in Dak Lak from 1986 to present, Doctoral thesis in religious studies, Hanoi.
- Do, Q.H. (2012). Urgent issues of religion in ethnic minority areas of our country at present (Survey in the Central Highlands and Northern mountainous region), Ministerial-level scientific project, Institute of Religious Studies, Hanoi.
- Do, H.N. (1995). Protestantism among ethnic minorities in the South Truong Son region - Central Highlands of Vietnam (1928-1975), Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh.
- General Statistics Office of Vietnam. (2019). Survey results to collect information on the socio-economic situation of 53 ethnic minority groups in 2019, Hanoi.
- Hoang, L. (2020). New issues in religion and belief in ethnic minority areas in our country at present, State-level scientific project, Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs, Hanoi
- Le, T.D. (2013). Religious trends in the world and their impact on religions in the Central Highlands in context of international integration, *Journal of Religious Studies*, Edition No. 9 (123): 3-11.
- Le, T.L. (2018). Catholic influence on sustainable development in the Central Highlands at present, Doctoral thesis at Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, Hanoi. From: <https://hcma.vn/content/tintuc/lists/news/Attachments/28865/TÓM%20TẮT%20TV.pdf>
- Nguyen, P.L. (2010). Transformation of religious life in Vietnam under impact of globalization, Ministerial-level scientific project, Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, Hanoi.
- Nguyen, P.L. (2014 a). The Challenge to Catholicism through the "Charismatic Renewal" Phenomenon and "Ha Mon" Religion in the Centre Highlands at Present, *Journal of Religious Studies*, Edition No. 4 (130): 82-92.
- Nguyen, N.M. (2014 b). Transformation of traditional religion among ethnic minorities in the northern mountainous areas of Vietnam at present, *Journal of Religious Studies*, Edition No. 09 (135), (2014): 114-125.

- Nguyen, V.M. (2016). New Religious Phenomena of Ethnic Minorities in the Central Highlands at Present, Vietnam Journal of Social Sciences, Edition No. 3 (100). From: <http://tapchikhxh.vass.gov.vn/cac-hien-tuong-ton-giao-moi-o-vung-dan-toc-thieu-so-tay-nguyen-hien-nay-n50216.html>
- Nguyen, V.M. (2017 a). New Religious Phenomena of Ethnic Minorities in the Central Highlands at Present, Public Security Publishing House, Hanoi.
- Nguyen, T.N. (2017 b). Promotion of ethnic cultural values on beliefs and religions in the Central Highlands, Front newspaper, Hanoi, October 18. From: <http://tapchimattran.vn/dai-doan-ket/phat-huy-nhung-gia-tri-van-hoa-dan-toc-voi-tin-nguong-ton-giao-o-tay-nguyen-10134.html>
- Nguyen, T.X. (2019). Changes of Protestantism in Vietnam, Political Theory Journal, Edition No. 6 (2019): 103-108.
- Nguyen, K.D. (2020). Protestantism in the Central Highlands and current issues), Electronic Political Theory Journal, Hanoi, January 2020. From: <http://lyluanchinhtri.vn/home/index.php/thuc-tien/item/3035-dao-tin-lanh-o-tay-nguyen-va-van-de-dat-ra-hien-nay.html>
- Pham, Q.P. (2015). Identification of changing trends in religious lives in the Central Highlands at present, Journal of Religious Studies, Edition No. 2 (140): 3-18.
- Thich, G.Q. (2014). Origin of Buddhism in Remote Areas and Problems for Buddhist Organizations in the Northern Uplands, Journal of Religious Studies, Edition No. 4 (2014): 67-74.
- Vu, T.T.H. (2018). Values and Functions of Protestantism in Ethnic Minority Areas in Vietnam at Present, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi.