A harmony of relationships

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Chinese culture has profoundly marked civilization in four major countries: China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam, including the social and political order of these nations. Although also influenced by other cultures, they have several elements in common, including approaches to different realities of life. The author recounts the impact of her more than twelve years encounter with Vietnamese life.

Vietnam is a country whose roots are lost in time. Chinese domination in the North for over a thousand years, the influence of Polynesian peoples in the South and the movement of the Khmer from neighboring Cambodia, have shaped the Vietnamese as an open, welcoming people, with a rich tradition. The dominant culture is its Chinese roots with some aspects partially influenced by Mahayana Buddhism.

When Vietnamese are asked about having a religious affiliation, the vast majority use the expression: "I have no religion." However, it is not atheism as we understand it in the West. Rather it is an open recognition of not identifying with any specific kind of worship or temple affiliation.

Christianity arrived in the sixteenth century with Japanese merchants fleeing the violent persecutions being unleashed in the Land of the Rising Sun. Franciscan, Dominican and especially Jesuits religious arrived from Macau, seat of the Portuguese Padroado[1] in that Asian region, to carry out intensive evangelization. Vietnam is possibly the country with the largest number of martyrs in the world (some speak of 300,000). It also has the third highest percentage of Christians among Asian nations, after the Philippines and the small island of Timor.

The sun and moon

I remember one scorching sunny afternoon in Ho Chi Minh City in southern Vietnam. During a catechetical meeting with a small group of youth between 13 and 15 years old, my friend began speaking about her discovery of the Gospel and especially about the Love of God. In order to communicate the idea of God's immensity and essentiality for our lives – and because it gives light and warmth – my friend started by saying: "God is like the sun…".

But immediately in unison, the girls shouted: "NO!!! God is not like the sun. The sun burns us, we don't want that!"

We were stunned. It is true that the sun burns and in southern Vietnam, where it is hot all year round, it often becomes unbearable! Thus, comparing God to the sun was not a happy comparison. Perhaps it is no coincidence that everything in Vietnamese culture revolves

around the moon: the lunar calendar, lunar festivals, rituals of "contact" with ancestors during the full moon ...

This experience helped me understand how mental categories can be different from culture to culture. But that was just the beginning.

Being

We once met an elderly French professor who was fluent in the Vietnamese language. We asked him to translate a book on 'Being': being empty of oneself in order to love the other. He translated it, but upon giving us the manuscript, he said: "I don't think anyone will understand what is written in this book." He had not – rightly – wanted to use terms from Buddhist culture to speak of "emptiness" and "nothingness", trying instead used a Christian concept instead. However, he had gone round and round in selecting words but was convinced that no one would comprehend it.

There is no verb, for example, that expresses "being". We always had to translate it with verbs like "to have", "to exist", "to be present".

It made me think of God's definition of himself: I am *who I am* (*Ex* 3:14). A 'being' that also expresses relationship in its existence! It is not an abstract, supreme being separate from us who does not enter and change our lives. Perhaps, this concreteness of *being* is closer to the biblical mentality than to our Greco-Roman mentality. This brings us to understand that the important thing is reality, is concreteness!

Harmony before all else

This way of perceiving reality also expresses itself in attitudes and ways of action.

When I was a university student there, a girl approached me one day. She wanted to practice speaking English and we quickly became friends, even traveling around Vietnam on several adventures. She was often at our house, too.

After some time, to my surprise, she told me that she had a French boyfriend and would soon be going to France. I expressed my surprise in not knowing about her boyfriend before, but she explained that this was natural for her. It was not about hiding anything. Rather, she had simply not seen any need for me to know! In that moment, I understood that not everything has to shared – only what is needed in that moment or for that occasion.

Likewise, in inviting someone to visit or to come to a gathering, none of our Vietnamese friends ever told us that they could definitely *not* come in responding to an invitation. Instead many would say: "I will do my best to come!".

The first few times it happened that the people we were waiting for did not arrive, but others arrived instead. There, too, we understood it is not considered courteous in the Vietnamese culture to say "no". The basic concept is that we should always maintain harmonious relationships. Saying no to someone would break this harmony.

It was not easy to understand because it felt as if someone was not being completely truthful. Instead, it is not so much about truth but rather about relationships, about trying to please the other and not disappoint them. Thus, we understood how those who said, 'I will do my best to come.,' would not come. This simply formed part of the cultural reality.

"Degrees" of truth...

Many of us from Western countries have a concept of *either-or* truths. Instead for the Vietnamese, reality is seemly more often "colorful" and lively, where even opposites can coexist. It can be viewed as a kind of "degrees of truth" is being articulated within a framework of delicateness and good manners. This is because the goal is not truth but rather harmonious relationships. I rarely saw anyone get angry. In fact, relationships are always characterised by kindness and smiles.

This way of acting has consequences. A European friend of mine tried to confront a co-worker regarding something that had gone wrong in a shared work project. The gentleman co-worker smiled, thanked him and then never showed up again. I knew this person and was concerned after hearing what had taken place. However, when I tried to reach out to him about what had happened, he did not mention it.

Some might say the reason for not returning was about "losing face", but could there be more to it? This helped me to be more careful in not having the pretense of possessing the total truth and needing to defend it at all costs. In fact, what is the 'boundary' between my truth and the other's truth?

A little humility can do no harm to anyone. It was not a question of entering into compromises with watered down ideas or ethical relativism... but a matter of changing mental frameworks in order to not demand that others think differently so that they will use the same mental categories as I do.

Which side is the Gospel on?

I sometimes wondered how such cultural realities fit with the Gospel, with Christianity? Where is the category of forgiveness that allows for starting over again, for facing conflicts and for distinguishing the person separately from the topic that might be the cause of dissent?

Some ways of doing things can seem contradictory to the Gospel but perhaps it is merely appearances. Perhaps it is sometimes the approach to reality that needs to change! Despite various errors committed over centuries in transmitting Christianity to these millenary civilizations[2], I saw how much the life of the Gospel can also illuminate a culture and make its most beautiful elements shine forth: harmony, delicacy, concreteness, etc.

It is an ongoing journey but following this path of the Gospel can shine further light on this beautiful nation that still remains so mysterious for many.

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[1] Agreement in which the Holy See granted the Portuguese monarchy the exclusive organization and financing of religious activities in the lands "discovered" by the Portuguese in the East.

[2] I refer in particular to the problems concerning ancestral worship.