TO UNDERSTAND CONFLICT - THE HERMENEUTICS OF HANS-GEORG GADAMER

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Abstract

Most of human conflicts are caused by ideological differences, and especially by the fight for power, and human history is the record of unending narratives of various ways to deal with them: the violent means, the peaceful way, the sentimental approach, the rational calculation, the religious faith, the moral virtues, the legal force, etc. That is an uncontestable fact. The problem does not come from difference but from our understanding of it. That decides our acceptance or refusal.

This article argues that it is not the difference or the power the *primary cause* of conflict. It is rather the problem of how one understands the difference, and the way of dealing with power. Individual greed, lust for power, wealth, domination… seduce us to see in difference as a sign of separatism and revolt. That means, it is our view, often one-dimensional, narcissist, chauvinist view of the world that matters. So, the genuine way to approach conflict one of the most fundamental ways to deal with conflict is true understanding. Understanding is both the pre-condition and the actual result of the process of dealing with conflict.

To support this view, I take the conflict between the Catholic Church and the state of Vietnam as a case for study. Their difference basically exists and is conscious by them. The point is, it has been misinterpreted, often deliberately, to suit their own interests. In bottom, it is kind of a misunderstanding deeply rooted in prejudice, nourished by dogmatic education, and guided by one's own interests. Hence, dealing with misunderstanding should be the first step to deal with conflict. Here is the reason of why Gadamer's hermeneutics is deliberately taken.: to Gadamer, hermeneutics is a science of understanding.

Relationship between the State and the Church is always a sensitive subject. Historically, Vietnam considered religion as significant factor for keeping the regime stable, securing the power of leadership and building the nation. That was the case of Confucianism, and Buddhism in the Ly and Tran dynasties. But religion would become a problem if its doctrines are incompatible to the State ideology, as seen in the case of Catholicism. In this situation, hermeneutics of Gadamer could be of great help. A study of the roles of *sensus communis*, prejudice, tradition, and history, as Gadamer did, is extremely helpful to discover the hidden roots of the conflict and the complexity of the State Church conflict.

For this purpose, the paper is divided into three parts: the first part offers a general view of Gadamer's hermeneutic; the second part analyses Gadamer's key concepts of *sensus*

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communis to understand the hidden cause of conflict; and similarly, the third part deals with Gadamer's perspectives on prejudice, tradition, and history.

Keywords: Vietnam, Catholic Church, Conflict, Hermeneutic, *Sensus Communis*, Prejudice, History, and Tradition

1. Introduction

This paper argues that the current conflict between the State of Vietnam and the Catholic Church is not born in differences in doctrines, but derived rather from unresolved issues of the past, such as religion policy, education, freedom of worship, missionary works, administration, etc. One of these thorny issues is the dispute about properties and lands of the Church that the state had confiscated or borrowed (but refused to return to the Church). All are making dialogue almost impossible. As a matter of fact, the two sides have not taken time to learn from each other. This has led to a lack of understanding, and the creation of entire small worlds of misinformation and misconceptions about the good will of both parties. Also, the conflict traces the trajectory of loss of influence or privileged positions of power, as well as a loss of benefits, pride, and so forth. In brief, conflicts arise from the "counter-position" of power and interest. In various contexts of power, Carlyle A. Thayer also point out that conflicts emerge when two parties in a dispute discuss who has the legitimate right to control people, and who retains ownership of properties and authority to make decisions.[1] In the case of ordaining bishops, instead of the Church, it is the State of Vietnam that claims to have the last word, the power of decision. The Church, of course, does not agree.

On the other hand, conflicts of interest may derive from different strategies of operating; perhaps, from one's desire to protect or sustain perceived personal/institutional benefits. These categories of conflicts come into clarity as we formulate a theoretical framework of hermeneutics for understanding the hidden root of conflicts. Probing the works of Hans-Georg Gadamer, who over the years have pioneered in hermeneutical philosophy, can be quite useful in a scrutiny of the conflict between the State of Vietnam and the Catholic Church in Vietnam. His approach to hermeneutics has significantly shaped the landscape of interpretation and understanding in many similar circumstances and situations. His hermeneutic approach is based on rationality to understand how conflict emerges in human societies. Hermeneutics is necessary for an ongoing and in-depth discourse to look for the root causes, and reach reasonable ground upon which to grasp the nature of the conflict between the State of Vietnam and the Catholic Church. Thus, in using the hermeneutic method, a further step to uncover the roots of the conflict. Also, the pain of the conflict is complicated by many lies and the proliferation of false information, which conceals the truth. The falsehoods and lies that are proclaimed in public are gradually taken as truth, or more and more widely assumed to be the truth. People then believe what they hear, and believe what they think they see. In this case, the real truth is forgotten, or not even recognized. In circumstances such as these, the hermeneutic method provides a vision to uncover and unveil the truth for everybody to see and understand.

In brief, this paper mainly focuses on Gadamer's view of *positive reinterpretation*, which shows an appreciation for the value of traditions and historical consciousness of history as part of human thinking and behavior. It contains Gadamer's understanding of *sensus*

1 Carlyle A. Thayer, "Political Legitimacy of Vietnam's One Party: Challenges and Responses," in Journal of Current Southeast Asian, Vol. 28, No. 4 (2009), p. 52-55.

communis as "prejudices or prejudgments."[2] Thus, the aim of Gadamer's philosophy is to unravel the layers of meaning embedded in the interplay between tradition and interpretation. Within those layers, it provides a way to discover the root need to investigate how the hermeneutics of Gadamer, such as his understanding of *sensus communis*, tradition, prejudice, and historical hermeneutics offer a profound perspective on understanding and interpreting a range of hidden conflicts that appear to quite obviously occur in human experiences, especially in the case of the government of Vietnam, and the Catholic Church. In this regard, this paper is divided into three parts. The first part illustrates a general background of Gadamer's view on hermeneutics. The second part studies the concept of *sensus communis*, and its potential to help us to understand the hidden cause in general. The third part deals with Gadamer's perspectives on prejudice, tradition, and history, which we take to examine the conflict of the Church and State.

2. General Background of Hans-Georg Gadamer's Hermeneutics

As a philologist, Hans-Georg Gadamer stresses the importance of ontological existential, experiential, and linguistic approach for hermeneutics. An ontological approach opens a way to understand that people recognize that what they are dealing with is a matter of the existence of human beings who are truly involved in conflict. In daily life, people often think that the experience of conflict is negative and unacceptable. Sometimes, people feel too timid to deal with conflict. By all means they want to avoid facing it. This is the precise point at which Gadamer invites people to reinterpret conflicts, to view them positively, which is to say to view them in such a way that enables them to learn from the mistakes they have made that have led to a spirit of conflict, and a desire to seek revenge.

With this perspective, Gadamer advises his students to change from negativity to positivity in a new interpretation of the issues. When people succeed in reexamining the conflict, they become open to dialogue, and to the possibility of making peace. They are gradually more able to avoid the aggravation of the situation. So, it is necessary to reinterpret conflict with a positive attitude. In this case, language becomes a tool to search for and create common ground to understand texts, various subject matters, or events involved with conflict. To have a common ground does not mean that members of a community are required to "wear the same T-shirt," or always agree to think in the same way. Establishing a common ground entail finding a common language to view each other with empathy or sympathy. Thus, "it is language that is constantly building up and bearing within itself commonality of world-orientation."[3] In other words, language is "always simply that which we speak with others and to others,"[4] and in a very real way *becomes* the mediation that guides people to reach a common understanding.

Gadamer goes on to explain that "commonality between the partners is so very strong that it is no longer the point that I think this and you think that, but rather it takes in the . . . interpretation of the world that makes moral and social solidarity possible."[5] Given these aspects as a point of departure, Gadamer says that none of us should forget the notion of

2 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, 2nd revised edition, translated by Joel Weinsheirmer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 17-27. Also, John Schaeffer, Giambattista Vico on Natural Law: Religion, Rhetoric, and Sensus Communis (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 65.

3 Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Language and Understanding," in Theory, Culture & Society Vol. 23, Issue 1, p. 17.

4 Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Letter to Dallmayr," in Dialogue and Deconstruction, ed. Diane Michelfelder and Richard Palmer (Albany, NY: Sunny Press, 1989), p. 98.

5 Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Letter to Dallmayr," p. 98.

sensus communis, prejudice, tradition, and history because, in daily life, each of these categories carries individual knowledge and a collective memory. Also, each of the categories is an inseparable part of human thinking. Thus, to understand the conflict between the State of Vietnam and the Catholic Church, the roles of *sensus communis*, prejudice, tradition, and history are all extremely important. To interpret the deepest aspects of the problem, we must appreciate the broad spectrum at work here, the *sensus communis*, prejudice, and so on. Notably, Gadamer does not provide a resolution to resolve the conflict. What he offers, however, is a key to comprehending the situation. His theory aims to lay out a "fusion of horizons" of understanding which includes and involves a search for common tradition, common knowledge, or common sense, which form the basis for peaceful social interactions. In other words, Gadamer does not explain further the essence of how people arrive at a common understanding. For him, divisive issues and suggested solutions "come together" (to use ordinary language) in the same way images exist in the mind, gradually evolve into new knowledge. This implies that the process of critical aspects "coming together" is an arduous challenge. We see here one of Gadamer's limitations. What follows in the next section is hoped to explain *sensus communis*, and its potential to help us understand hidden conflicts in general.

3. Sensus Communis

Relying on the thinking of Giambattista Vico, and careful to avoid plagiarism, Gadamer refers to the use of the Latin words *sensus communis*. The purpose is to provide an alternate understanding of the relevant English words, specifically the term "common sense." Gadamer describes *sensus communis* in a strict sense, saying the term designates "the concrete universality [that is represented] … by the community of a group, a people, a nation, or the whole human race."[6] In other words, *sensus communis* describes a collective sense of community, a common tradition, or a common knowledge of a community. This way of understanding does not reduce the authentic meaning and the capacity of *sensus communis*. Instead, it is "the way [that] the mind forms universal concepts out of judgments based on individual sense perceptions."[7] Gadamer emphasizes that *sensus communis* "obviously does not mean only that general faculty in all men, but the sense that founds community."[8] Thus, over human communication and a sharing of actual lived experiences, each member of a society recognizes that the notion of *sensus communis* can emerges, and is able to be "available to the orator, and [people with] access [to] it in the poetic nature of language, the 'common sensuality' which the audience shares and which embodies the *con-sensus*."[9] In the end, *sensus communis* is understood to be a "practical knowledge, phronesis," "another kind of knowledge,"[10] or "practical wisdom" of the community.

Likewise, in the world of English speakers, common sense is obviously general knowledge, which everyone within a community expects everyone else to know and share. Here, common sense means a general agreement that assigns meaning to something. When people in a society decide to call an object a pig, then everybody who sees that object, that

6 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 19.

7 John D. Schaeffer, "Sensus Communis in Vico and Gadamer," in New Vico Studies Vol. 5 (1987), p. 118.

8 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 19.

9 John D. Schaeffer, "Vico's Rhetorical Model of the Mind: 'Sensus Communis' in the 'De nostri temporis studiorum ratione,'" in Philosophy & Rhetoric Vol. 14, No. 3 (Summer, 1981), p. 163.

10 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 19. Also, István M. Fehér, "Hermeneutics and Humanism," in Niall Keane and Chris Lawn editors, The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), p. 588.

particular animal, automatically calls it a pig. In the end, without the consolation of the community, due to a general agreement, common sense becomes a legitimate or valuable judgment because it is meaningful to everyone in the situation. So, in this sense, "the *sensus communis* [common sense] is the sense of what is right, and of the common good that is to be found in all men."[11] Thus, the Gadamerian interpretation of *sensus communis* goes beyond the interpretation of persons speaking English. In this case, *sensus communis* is different from common sense because people of *sensus communis* form a society or community both to decide, and to assign meaning to objects. *Sensus communis* is grounded on the fact that a certain group of people has come together to make a decision. The process of making a decision is carried on by all, by the community, or by a group of people. In other words, mutual empowerment means staying together, and working together to achieve goals and progress. Therefore, "*sensus communis* obviously does not only mean [or refer to] that general faculty in all persons, but [designates] the sense that founds community."[12] Notably, Gadamer recommends that we should understand *sensus communis* as a "criterion" because it does not contain "an intellectual capacity… [or] the faculty itself."[13]

To offer an additional understanding of *sensus communis*, Gadamer turns to St. Thomas Aquinas and the Third Earl of Shaftesbury.[14] From Aquinas, Gadamer learns that *sensus communis* "is the common root of the outer senses–i.e., the faculty that combines them, that makes judgments about what is given."[15] This means *sensus communis* brings people together for the purpose of making decisions, and its faculty shows how matters should be handled so as to include as many participants as possible. The factors that label the "*common root of the outer senses*"[16] are the "ethical judgment under the rubric of taste."[17] Taste forms according to a given element of a particular human community, which has the capacity and faculty to make judgments. The judgments which that community makes lead to a finding (an additional discovery) of a sense of commonality to represent its own community.

From here, taste becomes the common root of the outer senses because taste is a specific element that shows "a special sensitivity and sensitiveness to situations and how to behave in them, for which knowledge from general principles does not suffice."[18] For example, the aroma and flavor of fish sauce is quite pleasant to many Vietnamese, but may not appeal to persons of other cultures. So, when people from a different culture are exposed to the same fish sauce popular among Vietnamese, they may respond negatively, saying that the sauce is awful, and that it "stinks." In many cases, with nearly unanimous agreement, people may say that a food item is positive in its flavor. Their emotions prompt them toward a positive assessment. They judge the flavor as acceptable. In the view of the community, is the fish sauce sweet, spicy, tasty, or flat? The entire group, that is to say, the community, passes judgment on the question of the sauce.

> The concept of taste undoubtedly implies a mode of knowing. The mark of [a food item as having a] good taste [flavor] is being able to stand back from

11 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 20.
12 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 19.
13 John D. Schaeffer, "Sensus Communis in Vico and Gadamer," p. 121.
14 John D. Schaeffer, "Sensus Communis in Vico and Gadamer," p. 119-120.
15 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 20.
16 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 20, the italics are mine.
17 John D. Schaeffer, "Sensus Communis in Vico and Gadamer," p. 120.
18 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 14.

> ourselves and our private preference. Thus taste, in its essential nature, is not private but a social phenomenon of the first order.[19]

In the spirit of the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, Gadamer interprets *sensus communis* as having "a virtue of the heart more than of the head."[20] This explains how it is that emotion plays an essential element in the process of a community making an important judgment or decision. When tasting fish sauce, people of a different culture may discover that its flavor is not pleasant. Thus, the flavor of the sauce causes a group of people to feel negative about it. "We simply don't like it," they may say. In this regard, "Shaftesbury argues that the principle of taste regulates the choice of pleasure, but that it must also regulate conduct. If it does not, then the individual is confronted with a contradiction."[21] Having explained the *sensus communis* from Gadamer's perspective, let us change our focus to something entirely different, the conflict between the State of Vietnam and the Catholic Church.

In short, from the perspective of *sensus communis*, the conflict between the State of Vietnam and the Catholic Church originates from the lack of a common understanding among members of both entities. "Understanding . . . is the original form of the realization of *Dasein*, which is being-in-the-world. Before any differentiation of understanding [of] … the various directions of pragmatic or theoretical interest, understanding is Dasein's mode of being."[22] So, in generally speaking, this indicates that Vietnamese involved in the conflict have not been able to reach the level of *Dasein'*s mode of being since they have failed to understand each other, and thus lack *sensus communis*. Hence, they are not relating as persons who are present for one another in the world. In other words, members of both entities have their own way of thinking and acting. This shows they have not recognized that "Understanding something is a way of being… [And] he or she who understands becomes involved in what he or she understands, and what one understands affects, changes, and transforms the person who performs the understanding."[23] If a sufficient number of persons on both sides of the conflict had reached a *sensus communis*, the conflict would have been resolved long ago.

This of course is not the case. The obvious implication therefore is that an extra step is necessary. That step is the achieving of a common understanding. In other words, the extra step here is the constructing of a consensus, an agreement on the side both of the State of Vietnam and the Church to follow the basic wisdom of the nation. The Vietnamese as a people should live out the meaning of a variety of proverbs that they have learned and held in their hearts since childhood. These proverbs learned when they were young urge Vietnamese to intentionally create and cherish communities of brotherhood and sisterhood where people understand, support, and sympathize with each other. Among these proverbs are these two: "The undamaged leaf covers the torn leaf," and "A mouthful given to one who is starving is worth a bag of food offered to one well-fed."[24] Thus, these proverbs invite people to reach beyond self- interest to seek the common welfare of the community. Once the provocative invitation of traditional proverbs is more deeply appreciated and recognized among the

19 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 32.

20 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 22.

21 John D. Schaeffer, "Common Places: Sensus Communis," in A Companion to Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism, edited by Walter Jost and Wendy Olmsted (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 287.

22 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 259. Italics are original.

23 István M. Fehér, "Hermeneutics and Humanism," p. 589.

24 "Lá lành đùm lá rách." "Một miếng khi đói bằng một gói khi no."

Vietnamese, then, in daily life, the concept of *sensus communis* becomes a reality. The power of the wise sayings could help resolve various conflicts.

Lamentably, *sensus communis* is lost if members of the two entities still doubt each other's good-will, or if they view each other as opponents. Ultimately, the sense of connection, or the *sensus communis* between them, becomes overwhelmingly vulnerable. A common understanding between the sides stands on increasingly shaky ground. Gadamer states, "The *sensus communis* is concerned only with things that all men see daily before them, things that hold an entire society together, things that are concerned as much with truths and statements as with the arrangements and patterns comprised in statements."[25] In short, Gadamer's statement highlights the notion that *sensus communis* is a quality developed through the experience of living together in harmony within a community. This communal existence allows for the development of a shared understanding, a grasp of life as a whole in its concrete universality, which stands apart from the abstract analyses of critique and theory. Next part deals with Gadamer's perspectives on prejudice, tradition, and history, as they appear to apply to the conflict of Church and State which we are examining.

4. Prejudices, Tradition, and History

We must understand first that prejudice carries a negative meaning when we only consider critiques that have become traditional since the Enlightenment.[26] Critics may continue to think that prejudices are a bad thing. The word itself is pejorative in its common, that is to say, its colloquial usage. Thus, viewing "prejudices" as a type of for-judgment or for-knowledge is unwise. In this regard, Gadamer follows the flow of Romantic criticism, however, by expressing a positive reinterpretation to challenge the conventional notion of "prejudice." He offers a new context for the term "prejudices" as "pre-understanding," or condition of understanding. He does so by emphasizing the value of the interpretative process. In this case, prejudices are laid out as a form of pre-understanding. A "prejudice" does not aim at a narrow mind to interpret a situation or series of events. When people come to understand objects, they must acknowledge that those objects are pre-conceptions.[27] While a pre-conception may shift our way of understanding or thinking, or while its point of view may appear to be an obstacle or problem of interpretation, Gadamer suggests that "prejudice, pre-understanding, pre-conception" are vital components that enrich the interpretive process.[28] In short, prejudices carry both positive and negative aspects "due to the influence of the Latin praejudicium."[29] Thus, according to Gadamer, "'prejudice' means a judgment that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined."[30] Therefore, prejudice can be seen as something that people share in common and, as such, can as an attitude or concept still function as the "common root of the outer senses," which is similar to the notion of *sensus communis*. Within this understanding, as a result, these two categories are not alien to each other. Both are part of patterns for human thinking. This is also a reminder not to forget that tradition and history are important and inseparable from human life.

25 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 24.

26 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 273.

27 The use of the hyphen does no harm, and appears to be helpful.

28 Anniina Leiviskä, Hans-Georg Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics in the Philosophy of Education: Beyond Modernism and Postmodernism (University of Helsinki, Institute of Behavioral Sciences, 2016), p. 25-33.

29 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 273.

30 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 273

Secondly, Gadamer explains that tradition adds positively to an experience of mutual understanding. Human life partakes of tradition, and life, in fact, is inescapable from tradition. Through language, therefore, tradition forms our knowledge of "knowing how" to think, to act, to communicate, and to judge. Hence, for Gadamer,

> We are always situated within traditions, and this is no objectifying process—i.e., we do not conceive of what tradition says as something other, something alien. It is always part of us, a model or exemplar, a kind of cognizance that our later historical judgment would hardly regard as a kind of knowledge but as the most ingenuous affinity with tradition.[31]

Gadamer describes the connection between tradition and self as the relation between object and subject, which cannot be separated. This does not mean tradition is a relationship that can diverge and converge. Thus, building on Gadamer, Allen Hance argues that "Gadamer defines tradition as something that we *are*, rather than as something that we are *related to*."[32] This means that human knowledge functions like a "tradition," and actually endorses human behavior and actions similar to the way the human body accepts drugs that are injected into it.

Obviously, the relation between self and tradition is situated in the concept of *horizon*, which offers a process for a community to grow into, with the hope and even goal of developing and agreeing upon a common judgment. Thus, according to Gadamer, *horizon* indicates "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage."[33] So, over the course of time, knowledge of tradition accumulates, and many past experiences become subjects of interest. From here, tradition may create a potential to guide people to have a bias understanding and judgement, because people become self-observe, and do not want to open themselves to learn from others. Also, tradition is all about handing down something, often in the form of words. Thus, linguistics on various levels takes on an importance of its own. Part of what is handed down is knowledge of the past which already exists, and is passed on to the recipients.[34]

Moreover, notably, in this sense, "tradition" cannot be used as a noun, but must be used rather as a verb to express a co-relational meaning with the German word "Überlieferung."[35] In this context, tradition plays an active role in passing on, transmitting, handing down, delivering up, and so forth. The act of "handing down" is *free.* The act is done both willingly and unconditionally. In the end, tradition is a given element to all human knowledge, and is not created by "free insight or grounded on reasons."[36] On the other hand, in a negative sense, the Enlightenment discredited and criticized tradition as overly dependent on authority, prejudiced, and non-rational because it embraced the old and rejected the new. Thus, Gadamer, by means of Romantic criticism, offers a positive reinterpretation of tradition, positing that tradition serves as a communal backdrop wherein "know-how" integrates various aspects of human existence—encompassing the past, present, and future—facilitating a genuine comprehension of the behavior of another individual. He challenges the

31 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 283.

32 Allen Hance, "The Hermeneutic Significance of the Sensus Communis," in International Philosophical Quarterly Vol. 37, Issue 2 (June, 1997), p. 137, the italics are original.

33 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 301.

34 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 391.

35 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. xvi.

36 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 282.

conventional notion of "prejudice," and revises it as "pre-understanding," or condition of understanding, by emphasizing its value in the interpretative process.

Fundamentally, Gadamer believes "authority" is also important in the process of "pre-understanding" because authority "has a wider view of things or is better informed."[37] The credibility of authority in tradition, however, is not "bestowed, [but] earned."[38] Undeniably, the role of authority must involve a command, and the subordination of an object to obey the subject. Authority does not demand "blind obedience but rather [obedience] with knowledge."[39] When tradition shapes our understanding of the world, it is deeply rooted in a historical context. Through tradition, we gain access to the collective wisdom of our predecessors. Thus, tradition is not a hindrance, but a valuable resource for understanding and engaging with the world. Every interpretation occurs within a historical context.

Having discussed tradition and prejudice as a pre-condition of understanding the human mind, this remaining section focuses on the essential role of history. Looking at ontological existence, human beings find themselves in a situation of history, and this situation offers premises with which to realize that history is part of human understanding, and that human understanding is connected with history. Gadamer declares that "history does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live."[40]

Thus, history plays a role as a pre-given form of human understanding. It may be difficult while conversing with someone to avoid making biased judgments because the influence of past history may distract us from the task of coming to know that person, of grasping their authentic self. To prevent this from happening, a level of consciousness is required. This is what Gadamer calls the "consciousness of being affected by history (Wirkungs geschichtliches Bewußtsein)."[41] Consciousness causes us to discover the past because "we are always already affected by history."[42] Knowledge of the past does not mean, however, that we separate the past from the present, current reality. Knowledge of the past, rather, is a continuity which connects the past and the present. In this way, we are able to reach a state of complete knowledge. We are more able to face current realities, current problems. Gadamer argues, "historical knowledge can [only] be gained by seeing the past in its continuity with the present."[43]

With this understanding, therefore, the past cannot be avoided because the current situation has taken root in the ground of past events. Understanding the root of the current situation therefore requires a sense of historical consciousness. In short, an experience of the historical past should not become an obsession for Vietnamese Catholics and the cadres of the State of Vietnam. Past negative experiences for the two sides, a result of various historical events, may offer potential positive experience in the future. This idea can be materialized in the context of the hermeneutical sphere.

37 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 281.
38 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 281.
39 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 281.
40 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 278.
41 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 301.
42 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 300.
43 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 323-324

In conclusion, to understand the conflict between Church and State in Vietnam, one must recognize that conflicts derive not only from different world-views and different languages. The hidden truth is that conflict comes from the prejudice, tradition, and history that the two entities retain in their communication with one another. In the context of prejudice alone, it is obvious that neither the Vietnamese Catholics nor the cadres of the State of Vietnam hold a positive view or understanding of the other. Rather, "in a pejorative sense," their "pre-understanding" consists of negative prejudices or negative prejudgment toward each other. In other words, their fore-knowledge is "partiality or bias that prevents objective consideration [of an entire range of issues… which create] … adverse judgment or opinion formed beforehand without good justification."[44] Thus, when the two sides communicate with each other, they experience a worldview that is bound by different languages.

Furthermore, the Vietnamese Catholics still think that the cadres of the State are atheists who oppress religion in general, and an incarnation of evil. For their part, cadres see Vietnamese Catholics as a group of Vietnamese that colludes with foreigners, American Imperialists, French colonizers, and the Vatican. Cadres also falsely accuse Vietnamese Catholics of having received certain benefits from the foreigners, such as advantages in educational opportunities. In the end, the negative prejudices become a form of preliminary communication for both Vietnamese Catholics and cadres. In a word, the negative prejudices are implanted in the assumptions of both Vietnamese Catholics and cadres. In short, these prejudices take on a life of their own, and become an unrecognized collective taboo. In other words, they join a group of topics "everyone" agrees not to discuss. In addition, there appears to be no real appetite on either side, that of the Church or the State, to search for the reason why the negative prejudices are so deeply rooted in the consciousness of the two sides. Over time, these embedded views, attitudes, and impressions become great obstacles to overcome. Many in Vietnam gradually take these prejudices for granted. They believe what they hear or think they observe without taking the time to investigate and reach a conclusion about what is real, and what is unreal, true, or untrue.

Consider, for example, the historical details of the French invasion. On the surface, many Vietnamese still think that Vietnamese Catholics cooperated with the French government to invade Vietnam. People came to believe it without any desire to search for the root causes of the invasion. Such thoughts led to complications, confusion, and misunderstanding among the Vietnamese. As a result, a variety of prejudices, all negative, became a common point of reference for Vietnamese to think that the cooperation between Vietnamese Catholics and the French government actually happened. Moreover, the promise of religious freedom was neglected when Vietnamese Communist officials gained power and sovereignty over Vietnam. In fact, the real possibility for freedom to blossom and grow was never allowed for. Many Catholics were killed or put into prisons. Distrust and misunderstanding resulted in the end. Gradually, broken harmony and heightened distrust became part of Vietnamese history, adding to the difficulty of reconciliation. This historical misunderstanding continues to be passed on to the next generation, and has now been transformed to become a Vietnamese tradition. Many young Vietnamese believe that the negative prejudice is legitimate and valid. The people of Vietnam need a completely honest interpretation of history and tradition.

44 Istvan M. Feber, "Prejudice and Pre-Understanding," in The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics, edited by Niall Keane and Chris Lawn (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), p. 284.

In brief, to overcome the prevalence of negative prejudice, tradition, and history on both sides, the State and the Church, Gadamer would suggest the construct of *sensus communis* because it is the outer root of the common language needed to understand the prejudices, tradition, and history that bedevil the conflict. Language is the root and mediation necessary to grasp the hidden causes of the conflict between Church and State in Vietnam. Gadamer states,

> We hold [that] the fact that our experience of the world is bound to language does not imply an exclusiveness of perspectives. If, by entering foreign language-worlds, we overcome the prejudices and limitations of our previous experience of the world, this does not mean that we leave and negate our own world. Like travelers we return home with new experiences. Even if we emigrate and never return, we still can never wholly forget."[45]

Gadamer's statement emphasizes that while our experience of the world is shaped by language, it does not confine us to a single, isolated perspective. Engaging with other "language-worlds" allows us to expand and deepen our understanding without abandoning our own. Opening ourselves in this context offers us new experiences. Thus, understanding is always historically and linguistically grounded, yet open to transformation through dialogue and encounter.

5. Conclusion

The effort to understand the hermeneutics of Han-Georg Gadamer is indeed arduous. It helps us to understand, however, the hidden element of conflict between the Vietnamese Catholic Church and the State of Vietnam. The exploration of Gadamer's ideas helps us to unravel the layers of meaning embedded in the interplay between tradition and interpretation. For example, the ideas of tradition, dialogue, history, and *sensus communis* offer a profound perspective on human experience. So, in utilizing the theory of Gadamer to analyze the current conflict between the Vietnamese Catholic Church and the State of Vietnam could help us reach a more complete understanding of the problem, and provide solid ground for reconstructing trust, common understanding, and reduce the misconception.

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45 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 445.

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