

# Cultural-Religious Dimensions of the ‘Ritual Issue’ in Pre-Colonial Vietnamese and Western Interactions

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## Abstract

Through a meticulous examination of edicts issued by both imperial courts and Christian missionaries, this article posits that the ‘ritual issue’ – i.e., the divergence in ritualistic practices and values between Christianity and indigenous religions – constituted a principal obstacle to the proliferation of Christianity in Vietnam between the 17th and 19th centuries. Notably, the paper identifies a substantive transformation in the perception of the ‘ritual issue.’ During the 17th and 18th centuries under the Trịnh-Nguyễn lords, the issue was predominantly approached through a cultural-religious lens. However, in the 19th century under the Nguyễn dynasty, the issue acquired a cultural-political character. The imperial court posited that the adoption of Christianity would undermine its rule, which was predicated on Confucian ethical-political norms. The paper argues that the prohibition of Christianity would have been

an inevitable policy under the Nguyễn dynasty, even in the absence of the association between missionary activity and colonialism.

## Keywords

Christianity/Catholicism – ritual issue – indigenous religions – Vietnam

## 1 Introduction

Concomitant with the advent of Catholicism in Vietnam, friction emerged between European missionaries – augmented by their Vietnamese Catholic converts – and compatriots who adhered to traditional religious practices. While it is well-documented that pre-Second Vatican Council Catholic doctrine prohibited ancestral veneration, thereby exacerbating cultural tensions, this paper contends that the discord extended beyond this singular issue. The crux of the matter, colloquially referred to by scholars as the ‘ritual issue’ (vấn đề nghi lễ), lies in a multifaceted divergence in ritualistic practices and social values between Christianity and indigenous Vietnamese religions.

To substantiate this argument, the paper conducts a rigorous analysis of primary sources – comprising both imperial edicts and missionary accounts – spanning the 17th to the 19th centuries. The analysis elucidates that the ‘ritual issue’ was the principal catalyst for the proscription of Christianity and thus represented a formidable barrier to the evangelization efforts in Vietnam. Moreover, this paper identifies an evolution in the characterization of the ‘ritual issue’: initially framed as a predominantly cultural-religious concern during the era of the Trịnh-Nguyễn lords in the 17th and 18th centuries; it underwent a transformation to encompass a pronounced cultural-political dimension under the auspices of the Nguyễn Dynasty in the 19th century.

Surely researchers will agree that the issue of rituals, referring to the difference/contrast between Catholicism/Christianity and indigenous religions and beliefs in terms of rituals and values, is usually only a cultural issue. However, as shown below, with the Nguyen Dynasty in Vietnam in the 19th century considering Confucianism as the state religion and increasing the ban on Christianity, the above issue no longer stopped at a simple cultural-religious aspect purely but also includes the socio-political aspect, meaning it is no longer a purely ceremonial matter. However, the article still uses the above term to properly describe the incident, and moreover, continues to use the above term, which has been widely circulated in the history of the

Christian mission in Vietnam and East Asia from the time of Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) and this issue was debated in the Holy See for a century under the title of the “Chinese ritual question” (see: Truong B.C. 1992, 132–133; Gheddo P. 1970, 9). In order to understand the specifics of this issue, the article would like to continue using the above term but put it in quotation marks.

## 2 The ‘Ritual Issue’ between Vietnamese Traditional Religions and Christianity as Reflected in Court Sources

### 2.1 *Absence in Court Histories*

Vietnam’s earliest court chronicles, such as *Đại Việt sử ký* (The Annals of Dai Viet 1272)<sup>1</sup> by Lê Văn Hưu (1230–1322), and *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* (The Complete Annals of Dai Viet 1479) compiled under the Lê Dynasty by Ngô Sĩ Liên, conspicuously omit any mention of a European presence. This lacuna extends to subsequent annals like *Đại Việt sử ký tục biên* (The Continuation of the Complete Annals of Dai Viet 1775) by Nguyễn Hoàn (1713–1792), Lê Quý Đôn (1726–1784), and Vũ Miên (1718–1782). This evidential void suggests that despite the extant presence of European missionaries and the burgeoning influence of Christianity, these developments did not warrant significant attention from native court historians.

### 2.2 *Discrepancies in Missionary Records*

In contrast, missionary archives from the 17th and 18th centuries are replete with accounts of interactions between European emissaries and the Trịnh and Nguyễn lords. The inaugural recorded missionary presence appears in *Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục* (The Imperially Examined Outlines and Descriptions of the Complete History of Viet, first published in 1856), dated 1533 (Quốc Sử Quán Triều Nguyễn 1998, 301). It is crucial to acknowledge the ambiguities shrouding this seminal account; the missionary’s surname – recorded as either Ignatius or Ignatio – his full name, nationality, and the exact circumstances under which he arrived in Nam Định remain undisclosed. Additionally, the document falls short of elucidating the content of his teachings or the reception they garnered among the local populace. Despite these uncertainties, the Catholic Church in Vietnam acknowledges this event as a foundational milestone in the Christian mission, signifying the inception of East-West cultural exchange in the country.

1 For titles of non-English historical texts, an English translation will be provided in the first use. In subsequent uses, they will be written in the original languages.

### 2.3 *Comparative Chronological Context*

The efficacy of Christian evangelization in Vietnam only gained traction during the Jesuit missions in Cochinchina in 1615 and in Tonkin in 1624. This temporal framework, symbolic as it may be, places Vietnam's Christian missionary timeline subsequent to that of China, commensurate with Japan, and antecedent to Korea and other regional counterparts.

The notion of a 'ritual issue' emerges prominently in the historical contact between Vietnamese traditional religions – most notably Confucianism – and Christianity. During the reign of Trịnh Tráng (1577–1657), European missionaries were already documenting instances of religious persecution. The inaugural apostolic record, dating from 1663 under the rule of King Lê Huyền Tông (1663–1675), articulates an early ban on Christianity:

'October, winter (1663). A reiteration of the ban on followers of the heretical Christianity. Previously, there was a Westerner called 'barbarian Hollander' who came into our country and brought the superstition of Jesus to deceive, seduce, and stupefy people. The superficial rural peasantry was devout to this religion; they set up a lecture hall for the preaching, the fascination was widened and deepened each day. Previously, the Court had ordered to expel that missionary, but the small-minded people who sank deep into that practice still could not change; thus, now another ban is made"

QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN 1998, 300–301

Missionary accounts corroborate the existence of numerous edicts aimed at curbing Christian practices in both Cochinchina and Tonkin. However, only a select few of these prohibitions have been immortalized in the historical annals (Taboutlet 1995, 424):

'March, spring (1712). Ban on the heretical Christianity again. The Court has repeatedly issued orders to ban Christianity, but the officials and the people were greedy for their bribes and covered for each other, so that religion spread and made people deluded deeper each day. Therefore, the Court had defined the prohibitions as follows: those who know that there are Christians are allowed to report it; adherents of that religion will have to cut their hair on the top of their heads, tattooed on the face four words 'students of the religion of Hollanders'; and 100 piastre will be given as reward to the reporter. But it could not stop the religion

QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN 1998, 400

During the seventeenth century, the Trịnh and Nguyễn lords, driven by the exigencies of the arms trade with European nations amidst internal strife, adopted a more lenient stance toward Christian missionaries, viewing them as diplomatic conduits. However, the eighteenth century saw a decline in the need for European weaponry, accompanied by an uptick in religious prohibitions (Nguyen 2007, 126–162). An edict by Trịnh Doanh exemplifies this shift:

'September, autumn (1754). Ban on the heretical religion of Hollanders again. Previously, around the year of Nguyên Hòa (1533–1548) of Lê Trang Tông, Ignatius, a Westerner, had brought that religion to the coastal areas of Giao Thủy district and Nam Chan district, secretly evangelized people; the religion was called 'Christianity' as well as 'religion of the cross.' This teaching uses paradise and hell to distinguish between the paybacks of good deeds and evil deeds, quite similar to Buddhism, but adding teachings of confession and baptism. They enticed and deceived day and night, the idiotic peasantry was seduced and deluded and did not give up even when there were bans and death sentence. Around the year of Cảnh Trị (1633–1671) and Chính Hòa (1680–1704), the government had issued clear prohibitions many times, but because the people's hearts had been covered for a long time, in the end it could not be changed. Now there is a discussion of issuing a stricter ban, but it cannot be stopped

QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN 1998, 626–627

By the 18th century, both the Trịnh and Nguyễn lords had already articulated their incapacity to stem the inexorable rise of Christianity within Vietnam. An illustrative edict issued by Trịnh Sâm in 1773 reads:

'October, winter. Ban on the heretical religion of Hollanders again. Within two months, Christians must change all their customs, and those who violate the orders will be guilty. As for the people, if anyone tolerates them, they will be punished, and those who report honestly will have their descendants exempted from hard labor

QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN 1998, 708

These edicts uniformly categorize Christianity as a heretical faith characterized by rituals and practices inimical to Vietnamese tradition. Accordingly, the Trịnh and Nguyễn lords found themselves compelled to suppress its spread, primarily attributing their actions to the religion's disruptive impact on local customs – a phenomenon broadly encapsulated under the term 'ritual issue.'

#### 2.4 *The 19th Century: Intensified Prohibitions*

The onset of the 19th century marked a paradigmatic shift in the imperial posture toward Christianity. With the Court in Huế formally adopting Confucianism as the state religion, the regulatory environment for Catholicism became increasingly restrictive. This transformation is documented in the *Đại Nam thực lục chính biên* (Chronicle of the Dai Nam: Principal Records, 1821–1925). While King Gia Long initially maintained a favorable disposition toward Catholicism – owing to the support he received from Bishop Pigneau de Behaine and Catholic constituents in his struggle against the Tây Sơn family – his subsequent reign witnessed a gradual distancing from European missionaries. The *Điều lệ hương đảng* (Court Charter on Village Rules), promulgated in 1804, epitomizes this shift. Although its provisions primarily focused on revising the rituals of traditional religions, they concurrently circumscribed the ascendancy of Catholicism within Vietnamese society (Nguyen 2007, 163–192).

An edict delineates the Vietnamese imperial perspective on Christianity as a foreign import, deceptively premised on notions of paradise and hell to ensnare the unsuspecting:

‘Christianity is an imported foreign religion which fabricates the theory of paradise and hell to make fools run after it like crazy, becoming infected and addicted without knowing. From now on, people of the communes that have ruined churches must submit the application to their magistrates to be allowed to fix them; building new churches are prohibited. These things are all about trying to change old bad customs and respect doctrine [Confucian]. If people keep sticking to their village habits and violating the law, in case someone finds out, the commune chief must go into exile faraway, demoted to ordinary people, subjected to hard labor in serious cases, beaten by whips or staffs in light cases – all these were to reduce the cost for the people and keep good and pure traditions

QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN 1963, 168–169

#### 2.5 *The Reign of Minh Mạng: Confucian Consolidation and Christian Confrontation*

King Minh Mạng was instrumental in elevating Confucianism to an unparalleled status, thereby solidifying the Đại Nam Empire's geopolitical influence. Concurrently, his reign initiated a direct confrontation with Catholicism. While Minh Mạng initially solicited the assistance of missionaries for translation services in 1827, this gesture was perceived as an insidious attempt to curtail their evangelistic activities. Some missionaries even interpreted this as a de

facto prohibition of Christianity. However, it was the 1833 edict that signified the formal schism between the Nguyễn Dynasty and the Catholic Church:

'Originally Christianity was introduced by Westerners a long time ago, stupid people are deluded without repentance. Think about it, the theory of paradise is, in short, just a delusion without evidence. Moreover, it pays no respect to spirits and does not worship ancestors, very contrary to the righteous path. They even build preaching houses, gathering many people [...] That religion is more evil than any religion [...] Therefore the order [...] anyone who practiced the Christian religion but now finds their conscience, knows fear and repentance, is allowed to confess to local officials and voluntarily quit the religion. If the local officials find them trustworthy, they can order them to practice this right at the spot: walking over the cross. Then report to the king, and those people will be exempted. As for churches and preaching houses, they will be destroyed by orders [...] Those who do not get rid of their old habits and dare to gather in secret, committing to violating the ban, once discovered, will be punished severely

QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN 1964, 235–236

## 2.6 *The Uprising of Lê Văn Khôi and Subsequent Anti-Christian Edicts*

The intricate political tapestry of the 1830s in Vietnam, notably punctuated by the Lê Văn Khôi uprising and the involvement of the missionary Marchand, precipitated a series of edicts aimed at inhibiting the spread of Christianity (Nguyen 2001; Lua 1988, 189–2005). This period also witnessed the promulgation of *Thập huấn điều* (The Ten Teachings), an influential treatise that underscored the supremacy of Confucian norms while denigrating Catholicism as an aberrant belief system.

Confucianism as the Paragon of Virtue: Excerpts from *Thập huấn điều*

The treatise articulates the primacy of Confucian learning and virtuous conduct, positioning it as the antithesis to the 'corrupting' influence of Catholicism:

'The key of learning is to know the way of being a human being; therefore, there is no one in the world who does not need to learn. I [the King] want you, the millions of people, to work hard on the correct learning, to know clearly morality. The way of Yao and Shun is founded upon filial piety and respect; the way of Confucius and Mencius emphasizes benevolence and righteousness. These are the teachings that should be learned. As for heretical religions and strange superstitions, do not let them deceive

and tempt you. Christianity is even more absurd: boys and girls gather together disorderly, acting like animals. It foments divisions and factions, advocates evil, and self-incurs penalties tantamount to capital crimes. It corrupts morality, undermines teachings, and is untrustworthy. If anyone has been seduced, they should leave quickly. All rituals, from coming-of-age ceremonies to weddings, funerals, and altar worship, must conform to Vietnamese customs. If you refrain from following the wrong paths, you will naturally tread the correct way [...] as the words in the Book of Mencius state: 'Eliminate the incorrect doctrines, get rid of bad habits, reject the lustful and evil words' [...] You all must respectfully listen

QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN 2004, 235

By the close of the 1830s, further edicts to particularize Minh Mạng's prohibition of Christianity were mentioned in the *Đại Nam thực lục chính biên*, albeit with incomplete textual records. Concurrently, Vietnam was embroiled in a geopolitical struggle with Siam (now Thailand) for influence over Cambodia. During the early reign of Thiệu Trị (1841–1847), anti-Christian measures appeared to wane in intensity, only to intensify under Tự Đức (1847–1883).

The escalation was not merely a function of doctrinal disputes between Confucianism and Catholicism, but also included the active participation of European missionaries and certain Catholic factions in Vietnamese political affairs. For instance, the rebellion led by Hồng Bảo and the looming threat of French invasion following the 1847 Tourane incidents contributed to this urgency. An edict from October 1857 encapsulates this climate:

'October, 1857. The mandarin Nguyễn Đức Trứ suggested that besides imposing strict punishments on those who hide foreign preachers and missionaries, we also need to confiscate their property. King Tự Đức agreed with that suggestion

QUỐC SỬ QUÁN TRIỀU NGUYỄN 1974, 377

Throughout the 1850s, a flurry of edicts was promulgated, each underscoring both the urgency and the perplexity of Tự Đức and the Court in mitigating the influence of Christianity. The edicts' implementation, however, was marred by inconsistencies between central and local governance. Just prior to the French assault on Tourane in April 1858, Tự Đức lamented the laxity and corruption of local officials in enforcing the Christian ban:

'The staff of the Bình Giang district government who live in the Trang Liệt commune implicitly follow the heretical religion [...] Yet the district



mandarin did not usually take that seriously, his government did not often advise and guide them [...] only when the criminal case of Christianity happened last year did they start to investigate [...] Moreover, among the investigated people, their report did not mention whether or not those people have left the religion. Conducting their responsibilities in such a manner is utterly insolent; yet, the district staff are responsible for leading people

VIỆN SỬ HỌC 2008, 58–62

The aforementioned excerpts serve merely as exemplars of a broader pattern: the intensification over time of conflicts between Western-imported Christianity and the native Vietnamese courts. These conflicts reached their apogee in the mid-19th century. While it remains true that we have yet to unearth any royal documents explicitly sympathetic or even neutral toward Christianity, the absence itself is telling. This suggests that if such documents exist, they are indeed anomalies.

During a span of approximately three decades, from 1833 to 1861, Kings Minh Mạng, Thiệu Trị, and Tự Đức promulgated a multitude of edicts proscribing Christianity – a number that surpasses the cumulative total of such edicts issued by the Trịnh, Nguyễn, and Tây Sơn lords during the entirety of the 17th and 18th centuries. The gravity and scope of these edicts, moreover, were markedly more severe compared to earlier periods. This suggests that the Nguyễn Dynasty, from Minh Mạng to Tự Đức, perceived Christian influence as one of the most formidable threats to national security. It is worth noting, however, that not all edicts against Christianity have been meticulously documented. In this context, the records maintained by European missionaries could serve as invaluable complementary sources, furnishing a more comprehensive understanding of the historical dynamics at play.

### 3 The “Ritual Issue” in Vietnam as Evidenced by Missionary Documents: A Multifaceted Examination

#### 3.1 *Missionary Objectives and Ideological Contributions*

Beyond their fundamental objective of disseminating the Gospel and extending the Kingdom of God, European missionaries have occupied a pivotal role in the modern history of East Asia. Serving as de facto cultural and ideological emissaries, they facilitated the influx of Western values into the region, thereby catalyzing East-West dialogues. Notwithstanding these expansive roles, it is the ‘ritual issue’ that stands out as the principal impediment to the spread of

Christianity in Vietnam, as corroborated by both national historical records and missionary accounts.

### 3.2 *Alexandre de Rhodes: Critiquing Indigenous Religions*

Alexandre de Rhodes, in seminal works such as *Histoire du Royaume du Tonkin* and *Catechismus*, exhibited a palpable contempt for indigenous religious practices and cultural mores. His documentation includes prohibitive edicts issued by the Trịnh lords in Tonkin, which are conspicuously absent in court historical accounts (Rhodes 1994, 136). Rhodes scrutinized traditional Vietnamese religions (Rhodes 1994, 124) for their conspicuous omission of metaphysical inquiries concerning cosmogenesis – neither Taoism, Confucianism, nor Buddhism addresses the origin of the universe. In the Christian cosmological framework, this lacuna rendered Tao, Confucius and Buddha inferior to the Christian God, conceived as the Creator. Consequently, it is understandable that traditional religions were seen as the main obstacle to evangelization (Rhodes 1994, 128).

### 3.3 *Additional Missionary Perspectives: Cristoforo Borri*

While less frequently cited, other missionary accounts offer supplementary viewpoints. Notable among these is *Relation de la Nouvelle Mission des Peres de la Compagnie de Jesus au royaume de la Conchinchine* by Cristoforo Borri (1583–1632), first published in 1631 (Borri 2018, 212–213). This treatise provides a comprehensive overview of the geography, economy, and socio-cultural fabric of indigenous societies. Borri's work reveals a Christo-Eurocentric lens through which European missionaries, despite their avowed objective of religious dissemination, approached indigenous cultures and belief systems. Borri's critiques extended to the indigenous practice of venerating deceased local heroes and craftsmen, the polytheistic tendencies of the Annamese and the religious syncretism manifest in Vietnamese temples where not just Shakyamuni Buddha but also other Arhats received worship.

An illuminating divergence in perspectives on ritual practices comes to the fore in debates between European missionaries and indigenous communities, specifically in the context of ancestor worship. Cristoforo Borri expressed particular consternation at the Vietnamese custom of presenting food offerings at ancestral altars (Borri 2018, 212–214). In his theological explication, Borri posited that the soul resides solely in the spiritual domain, rendering corporeal activities such as eating and drinking irrelevant to it. Consequently, he considered the practice of food offerings incongruous, thereby highlighting that, from the inception of the Christian mission, the 'ritual issue' has

constituted a significant impediment to the mutual assimilation of East-West cultures and ideologies.

### 3.4 *Multinational Jesuit Perspectives: The Underrepresented Germanic Voices*

While the Jesuit missions to Vietnam are often associated predominantly with Portuguese, Italian, and French missionaries, the scope was, in fact, far more cosmopolitan. Jesuits from Germanic regions – including Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Bohemia – also participated, albeit their contributions have been comparatively underrepresented in historical narratives and scholarly investigations. These Germanic Jesuits, much like their counterparts from other European countries, exhibited a general aversion toward indigenous rituals, particularly those related to funeral practices.

### 3.5 *Intersecting Worldviews: Superstition vs. Cultural Practice*

European missionaries often dismissed the religious and ritualistic practices of the Vietnamese as mere superstitions. One such point of contention involved the indigenous custom of interring food, gold, and money with the deceased – a ritual that, from the European perspective, defied rationality given the posthumous impotence of such material items. Although native explanations were proffered, the ideological chasm remained unbridged, highlighting the intransigent nature of the 'ritual issue' (Neugebauer 1997, 274–279).

Bibliographical sources underscore a salient aspect of the European missionary perspective: a proclivity for positioning Christianity as the sole arbiter of moral and ethical values, to the detriment of indigenous religious traditions. This evangelical fervor did not go unchallenged; it precipitated considerable backlash among local Buddhist clerics and spiritual practitioners. The resultant societal pressures were instrumental in galvanizing the Nguyễn lords to issue edicts prohibiting Christian practices, thereby highlighting the multi-layered complexities of the 'ritual issue' (Siebert 1997, 133). Missionary documents from German-speaking regions reveal intriguing parallels between the 1750 edict against Christianity issued by Võ Vương in Cochinchina and earlier proscriptions promulgated by Chinese emperors Kangxi (1662–1722), Yongzheng (1722–1735), and Qianlong (1736–1795). These edicts were not merely reactionary measures against the potential loss of popular faith in traditional religion but were instead aimed at safeguarding the integrity of the Confucian sociopolitical framework. Concerns over the erosion of faith in the dynastic authority undergirded these prohibitions, casting Võ Vương's edict as among the most stringent issued by the Trịnh and Nguyễn lords in the 17th and 18th centuries (Neugebauer 1997, 289–298, 318–358).

### 3.6 *Reconsidering the Colonial Paradigm: Trade as a Vector of Christian Influence*

The examination of German-speaking missionary sources up until 1752 uncovers an often-overlooked nuance: the absence of an explicit link between Christian missionary activity and colonial expansion. Instead, these sources emphasize the correlation between Christian missions and trade. This observation warrants serious scholarly consideration, especially in the contexts of Vietnam and China, where post-colonial narratives – predominantly shaped by communist ideologies – have conflated Christian missions with colonial enterprises. This conflation risks obscuring the multifaceted historical realities, including the transitional phases of Christian mission from an initial focus on trade to subsequent colonial entanglements.

### 3.7 *The Dialectics of Affinity and Dissonance: Nguyễn Ánh and Bishop Pigneau de Behaine*

Contrary to post-colonial characterizations that simplistically depict Nguyễn Ánh as one who “invited the snake that ate his chickens,” the historical record, enriched by missionary accounts, portrays a man of complex affective relations toward Catholicism. Despite his collaborative rapport with Bishop Pigneau de Behaine – particularly during his conflict against the Tây Sơn family – Nguyễn Ánh manifested a discernible reticence toward Catholic doctrine. His oft-repeated sentiment, “This religion is good but I cannot follow it,” encapsulates this ambivalence, described by the French missionary Louvet as a lifelong complex (Louvet 1896, 263).

### 3.8 *Ritual Controversies: Ancestor Worship and the Anxieties of a Confucian Court*

Nguyễn Ánh's resistance to Catholicism extended beyond mere doctrinal disagreements over monogamy. It penetrated the core of Vietnamese cultural-religious practices – namely, ancestor worship. Multiple impassioned discourses with Bishop Pigneau over this matter led to the latter petitioning the Holy See for doctrinal flexibility (Truong 1992). This schism underscored the incongruence between pre-Second Vatican Council Catholic teachings – which unequivocally rejected ancestor veneration – and a court that esteemed Confucian virtues of loyalty and filial piety. A seminal moment transpired in 1797 when Prince Canh, Nguyễn Ánh's son, publicly refused to prostrate himself before the ancestral altar, thereby revealing the deep-seated influence of European missionaries, although Prince Canh was not a Catholic (Louvet 1896, 263).

As Confucianism ascended to the status of a state religion under the Nguyễn Dynasty, the nature of the ‘ritual issue’ metamorphosed. No longer confined

to purely cultural or religious dimensions, it acquired significant cultural-political ramifications. A Confucian ethic-political regime faced an existential threat to its legitimacy with the burgeoning influence of Catholicism. In this regard, J. Buttinger's observation that "there is not much difference between Gia Long's passive hatred toward Catholicism and Minh Mạng's measures to outlaw Catholics" captures the continuity and transformation of this complex dynamic (Buttinger 1969, 274).

The religion of Dato, already proscribed by Kings Minh Mang and Thieu Tri, is evidently a perverse religion, for in this faith, one does not honor one's deceased parents; rather, the eyes of the dying are extracted to compose a magical water used to bewitch people. Moreover, numerous other superstitious and abominable practices are engaged in. Consequently, European masters, who are the most culpable, will be cast into the sea with a stone around their necks. A reward of thirty silver bars will be given to anyone who can capture one. The Annamite masters are less culpable than the former; they will be interrogated to see if they are willing to apostatize. If they refuse, they will be branded on the face and exiled to the most inhospitable regions of the kingdom

LOUVET 1896, 173–174

Some forbidding edicts can only be found in missionary documents, such as another in 1851:

Jesus' religion came from the West, it does not worship ancestors and gods, makes people deluded by the theory of paradise, hell and holy water. The missionaries know that our law does not tolerate that doctrine, but they still preach about the suffering of Jesus, their Lord, to seduce the ignorant [...] The foundation of our civilization is to keep orderly and customary. But these customs and traditions are threatened by the spread of this heretical doctrine which has a monstrous heart under a human face [...] Following are some of the rules that were enacted: Western preachers will be thrown into the lakes, rivers and the sea until death. In order for the law of the country to be strict and clear, Vietnamese priests will be chopped in half, regardless of whether they accept to walk over the cross or not.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi* (APF), 1852, XXIV, p. 11. French translation by Bishop Retord. Quoted by P. J. N. TURK, *French Catholic Missionaries and the Politics of Imperialism in Vietnam (1857–1914), a Documentary Survey*, Liverpool, Liverpool Press, p. 34–35. This edict is not mentioned in the *Đại Nam thực lục chính biên*.

Another edict, issued in 1855, was recorded in detail by French missionaries, contains an order of Tụ Đức:

European masters, when captured, will have their heads severed; the heads will be displayed for three days, then thrown into the sea along with the corpse. Every student of a European master and every priest of the country will likewise have their head severed. Disciples of the country's priests will be branded on the face and sent into exile. (...) If any barbaric ship comes into our ports, maritime mandarins must be on guard and observe the edicts of the most illustrious and virtuous Minh Mang. The governors of provinces, prefects, and sub-prefects are the eye of the people; the chiefs of cantons and village mayors are as if the head. All know who are the rabble that follow the perverse religion of Dato; yet they slumber in carelessness, thus allowing the good people to stray into the wrong path. Even among our officers, some hide and excuse these villains

LOUVET 1896, 206

The proliferation of interdictory edicts issued by the Tụ Đức court in the late 1850s illuminates both the perceived exigency of the matter in the context of national security and the court's palpable ineffectiveness in mitigating the ascendant sway of Christianity. This torrent of legislative proscriptions was not solely a reflexive response to the burgeoning influence of the Christian faith within Vietnamese social fabric; rather, it was chiefly motivated by apprehensions regarding the potential synergies between European missionaries, the nascent Christian community, and French invaders. In furtherance of these efforts to contain the perceived threat, an additional edict was promulgated on June 7, 1857:

The pernicious religion of Jesus was initially introduced to China during the Ming Dynasty by an individual named Loi Ma Doi [Mateo Ricci], and subsequently spread to our country under the Lê Dynasty. This spurious faith began by stealthily infiltrating the uninformed populations residing along the coastal areas. Gradually, this deleterious doctrine has proliferated throughout the kingdom, and now approximately four-tenths of our populace are afflicted by its influence. It has garnered numerous clandestine adherents among the ranks of the mandarins and the military. If we do not exercise vigilance, this contagion will ultimately pervade the entire realm

LOUVET 1896, 248–249

While it remains plausible that neither the court documents nor the accounts of European missionaries comprehensively enumerate all edicts aimed at the persecution of Christianity, the extant records are emblematic of the policy stances adopted by the Trịnh-Nguyễn lords of the 17th and 18th centuries, as well as the Nguyễn dynasty in the 19th century. Consistently, the content of these edicts foregrounds the so-called 'ritual issue' as the locus of contention.

#### 4 Some Remarks

Initially, it is imperative to acknowledge that the religious landscape of Vietnam and, by extension, East Asia, exhibits distinct attributes. Predominantly, the traditional religious practices in this region lean toward polytheism, lack institutional rigidity, and embody a high degree of tolerance. Notably, the annals of Vietnamese history are virtually devoid of religious conflicts. The relationship between the Vietnamese state, grounded in Confucian principles, and other religious traditions exhibits nuanced dynamics – generally marked by tolerance but not without points of contention.

The unique character of Confucianism further complicates this relationship. Confucianism diverges from typical religious doctrines by its pronounced secularity. It eschews discussions on the afterlife, and Confucius himself is not considered a prophet. Consequently, within the scholarly discourse in both Vietnam and China, Confucianism is predominantly perceived as a moral-political ideology rather than as a religion in the conventional sense – that is, a set of beliefs concerning the relationship between human beings and deities.

However, this categorization may be contested when one scrutinizes the functions that Confucianism performs across various domains of social life – economics, politics, culture, ethics, law and so forth. In this multifaceted interaction, Confucianism manifests characteristics that align closely with the functions typically ascribed to religions. It is in this particular context that Christopher Dawson referred to it as the 'Confucian religion' (Dawson 1948).

As a secular religious tradition, Confucianism intrinsically necessitates a level of syncretism with other religious systems for its continued relevance. This symbiosis perhaps accounts for the conspicuous absence of religious conflicts in the East Asian Confucian milieu throughout premodern history. To date, academic focus in Vietnam has been primarily trained on the syncretic interplay between Confucianism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Taoism or local religious practices – commonly referred to as the 'Three Teachings' – which constituted the bedrock of Vietnamese spirituality in the pre-colonial era.



However, this represents only a fragment of the broader analytical scope that merits scholarly exploration.

Firstly, the current emphasis on the ‘Three Teachings’ tends to foreground the impact of Chinese cultural influence on Vietnam, thereby adopting a Sinocentric approach. While it is true that Chinese philosophical and cultural paradigms exerted significant influence, particularly in Northern Vietnam, this perspective diminishes the contributions of other external factors. For instance, the import of Indian culture, palpable in the Champa and Khmer cultures of Central and Southern Vietnam, has been inadequately assessed. Moreover, upon its introduction, Taoism was largely absorbed into indigenous Vietnamese culture, unlike Confucianism or Buddhism, which retained distinct cultural identities. The Sinocentric lens also undervalues the rich tapestry of local religious traditions.

In the context of Southeast Asia, the maxim ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans do’ (nhập gia tùy tục) captures the essence of the indigenous religious landscape. Any externally introduced religious or cultural systems must conform to this principle to gain a foothold and flourish. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, encountered resistance due to its initial refusal to accommodate ancestor worship – a discord that eventually led the Holy See to modify its stance during the Second Vatican Council. This episode serves as a cautionary tale in the annals of Christian missionary endeavors.

Moreover, it is this principle of localization that has rendered Islam in Southeast Asia less radical than its manifestations in other global contexts, thereby minimizing interreligious conflicts. Despite Indonesia’s status as the world’s most populous Muslim-majority country, it has not become a hotbed for extremist activity. In summation, the ‘Three Teachings’ in the Vietnamese context more accurately comprise Confucianism, Mahayana Buddhism and indigenous religious practices, including absorbed elements of Taoism. When Vietnamese individuals refer to Taoism, they are more likely to evoke local North Vietnamese deities like Tien Dung and Chu Dong Tu rather than Chinese figures like Laozi or Zhuangzi. This indigenization differentiates Vietnamese Confucianism and Buddhism from their Chinese and Indian counterparts, respectively.

Secondly, the internal dynamics within the triad of the ‘Three Teachings,’ primarily the tension between the Confucian secular state and Buddhism alongside indigenous Vietnamese religions, warrant more rigorous scholarly scrutiny. Max Weber articulated a similar notion within the context of Chinese culture (Weber 1988). The issue extends beyond mere lifestyle incongruities or divergences in ritualistic practices and social norms, as evidenced by the critiques Confucians and Buddhists in both Vietnam and China have levied



against each other. Intriguingly, the discord has also permeated the political domain.

In Confucianism, the monarch is venerated as the ‘Son of Heaven,’ a sacrilized embodiment of the nation to whom unwavering loyalty is deemed the utmost virtue. This Confucian ideal is anathema to Buddhists, who prioritize liberation from the cycle of samsara and regard karma as a foundational philosophy of life. Furthermore, the schism can be discerned in the realm of economic interests. Both Chinese and Vietnamese Confucian bureaucracies have recurrently confronted shortages of bronze, prompting them to confiscate such materials from Buddhist temples for the casting of coins and armaments.<sup>3</sup> This points to an underlying animosity toward Buddhist monks, who are often perceived as non-contributors to the state economy due to their exemption from physical labor and taxation. They are, at times, derogatorily referred to as ‘parasites,’ illuminating the extent of the disdain harbored by Confucian administrators.

Even if one were to confine the analysis of the ‘ritual issue’ to its cultural-religious dimensions, the gravity of the matter remains palpable. The chasm between Christians and non-Christians is stark, as demonstrated in the ensuing table 1:

In recent decades, both Christian and non-Christian communities in Vietnam have undergone transformative changes. The Second Vatican Council significantly liberalized the Catholic Church’s stance toward other religions and cultures, thereby permitting Vietnamese Catholics to engage in ancestral veneration. Presently, the Catholic Church in Vietnam actively champions cultural integration. Conversely, within the non-Christian demographic, the Renovation Policy (Đổi Mới) and the disintegration of the Communist bloc in

TABLE 1      Differences between Vietnamese Christian and Non-Christian seen from a cultural-religious viewpoint

Traditional non-Christians	Christians
Under influences of traditional East Asian Confucian culture	Under influences of Christian-European culture
Loyalty to emperor above all	Loyalty to emperor but Christ comes first

3 This happened in both China and Vietnam. In Vietnam, it was carried out multiple times and systematic under the Tay Son Empire which lasted not very long but was always in wars.

TABLE 1      Differences between Vietnamese Christian and Non-Christian seen from a cultural-religious viewpoint (*Conti*)

Traditional non-Christians	Christians
Patriarchy, males conduct ancestor veneration and inherit property, polygamy	Gender equality, women are educated and emancipated, monogamy
Parents-children: filial piety with ancestor veneration	Parents–children: filial piety but without ancestor veneration <sup>4</sup>
Cultural-religious life: polytheism, not devout to any religion	Cultural-religious life: monotheism, devout to Christ
Religiously inclusive and tolerant	Religiously exclusive
Religious activities: private, loose, or without church organization	Religious activities: collective, with strong church organization
Relationship with God: a relative distance	Relationship with God: an absolute distance
Hierarchy: by age and social position	Hierarchy: by church position

SOURCE: NGUYEN (2008, 14)

the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe catalyzed Vietnam’s adoption of a more open posture toward religious plurality, as embodied in the Communist Party of Vietnam’s Resolution No. 24 in November 1990.

Nonetheless, salient distinctions between Christian and non-Christian communities persist, particularly in the realm of ritual practices. An examination of this ‘ritual issue’ underscores that it is far from trivial. Christianity, with its institutional and monotheistic framework, faces considerable challenges in reconciling with indigenous religions. To be more precise, doctrinal and ritualistic disparities between Christianity and native spiritual traditions are far more pronounced than those observed intra-indigenously. Unlike the predominantly polytheistic and syncretic nature of traditional Vietnamese religions, Christianity is markedly monotheistic and ecclesiastical. The advent of Christianity in East Asia during the post-medieval period coincided with the rise of secularism, engendering a call from the Church for autonomy from

4 The Vietnamese Catholics were allowed to carry out their ancestor veneration only after the Second Vatican Council (Nguyen 2008).

state structures – a notion antithetical to the Confucian societies prevalent in the region.

In summary, the friction between two diametrically opposed worldviews – European missionaries steeped in Eurocentrism and the Nguyễn Dynasty with its Sinocentric orientation – appeared inexorable. Religious prohibitions were not uncommon during the 17th and 18th centuries. However, they were enacted within the framework of an 'ambivalent policy' by the Trịnh lords in Tonkin and the Nguyễn lords in Cochinchina. While these lords were in ideological conflict with the nascent European religion, particularly concerning the 'ritual issue,' they simultaneously recognized the necessity of European trade, particularly in armaments, to fuel their ongoing civil conflicts. Consequently, religious persecutions during this period were relatively moderate.

Transitioning into the 19th century, the stakes escalated considerably. The Nguyễn Dynasty had institutionalized Confucianism as the state religion, and prohibitions were enacted to safeguard the orthodoxy of the Confucian court. The 'ritual issue' transcended mere cultural dissonance to assume overt political dimensions. A regime predicated on Confucian ethical-political norms would find its legitimacy imperiled should Vietnam transition into a Christian nation. The majority of edicts, therefore, underscored the imperative of preserving traditional Confucian values against the encroachment of Christianity. In accordance with Confucian paradigms, the Emperor – revered as the Son of Heaven – wielded absolute authority both in secular and theological domains, rendering the Western model of state-church separation fundamentally incompatible.

Thus, the prohibition of Christianity seemed almost preordained, despite its divisive repercussions in bifurcating the populace into Christian and non-Christian segments. The inherent conflict between Confucianism and Christianity was inevitable. Christianity, a burgeoning faith with aspirations of expanding the Kingdom of God and the dominant religion of the era, was fundamentally at odds with the indigenous Confucianism, which resisted subjugation. Consequently, the most vociferous opponents of Christianity in 19th-century Vietnam were not Buddhist monks or Taoists – as had been the case in the 17th and 18th centuries – but Confucian scholars, whose influence and power were jeopardized. Even following the Nhâm Tuất Peace Treaty of 1862 and the subsequent Giáp Tuất Peace Treaty of 1874, which ostensibly curtailed religious persecution, key scholars such as Trần Tấn and Đặng Như Mai in the 1870s, along with the Cần Vương Movement (1885–1896), persisted in their resistance, encapsulated in the rallying cry of 'eliminating both the French and the Catholics.'

An additional layer of complexity exacerbating the tension between indigenous faiths and Christianity was the confluence of Christian evangelism and colonial ambitions. Academic discourse often delineates two distinct phases of Christian missions: the initial phase associated with commerce and the subsequent phase intertwined with colonialism. The demarcation between these two periods is conventionally marked by the dissolution of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in 1799. However, the specific timelines may deviate according to regional idiosyncrasies. In the Vietnamese context, a significant watershed moment occurred in 1787 when Bishop Pigneau de Behaine, representing Lord Nguyễn Ánh, formalized the Treaty of Versailles with the French monarchy, thereby furnishing a *casus belli* for French incursion into Vietnamese territory.<sup>5</sup> Prior to this, missionary activities were predominantly correlated with trade, as emissaries of faith accompanied European mercantile expeditions. It is crucial to distinguish these nuanced phases to avoid reductive interpretations. This intricate relationship between Christian missions and colonial enterprises was by no means a phenomenon unique to Vietnam; rather, it was a ubiquitous feature of modern global history wherever Western powers exerted colonial dominion. In the Vietnamese experience, the Catholic populace was more often the victim than the agent in this tragic tableau of global history. The disconcerting irony lies in the fact that the same European missionaries who were venerated for disseminating Gospel teachings were concurrently implicated in the colonial apparatus. Owing to a confluence of factors, Vietnam remains one of the few locales where the Catholic community experienced an extraordinary degree of suffering.

The animating force behind the anti-Christian and anti-French movements in late 19th-century Vietnam was not a generic form of nationalism but rather a fervent commitment to preserving Confucian civilization.<sup>6</sup> The Nguyễn Dynasty and its Confucian intelligentsia viewed the 'ritual issue' as an existential threat to the integrity and legitimacy of the Confucian court. Consequently, proscriptions against Christianity seemed almost inescapable, even in the absence of a direct nexus between Christian missions and colonial enterprises. While the colonial dimension undoubtedly exacerbated the severity of these proscriptions, it was not the principal catalyst.

5 The Versailles Treaty has no decree mentioning the evangelization in Annam. It means that the Bishop signed this Treaty not as a Bishop but as a representative of the government.

6 See: *Hịch Phong trào Văn thân của Trần Tân và Đặng Nhu Mai in 1874* (Slogan text of Literati Movement led by Trần Tân and Đặng Nhu Mai in 1874), in Y. TSUBOI (1990), *Nước Đại Nam đối diện với Pháp và Trung Hoa 1847–1885* (Đại Nam facing France and China in 1847–1885), Hồ Chí Minh city, Ho Chi Minh City Council 1990, 313–314.

## 5 Conclusion

In scrutinizing the proscriptions against Christianity emanating from both official and missionary archives, one discerns the enduring salience of the 'ritual issue' from the advent of Catholicism in Vietnam to the period wherein the Tự Đức court grappled with French incursion. This issue can be explicated through two hermeneutic lenses. The first interprets the 'ritual issue' as a pedagogical endeavor by the ruling class to dissuade the populace from adopting Christianity. The second construes it as a substantive concern that rendered local authorities apprehensive about the spread of Christianity.

A palpable metamorphosis in the character of the 'ritual issue' is evident, transitioning from a predominantly religious-cultural focus in the 17th and 18th centuries during the Trịnh-Nguyễn epoch, to a more political-cultural orientation under the auspices of the Nguyễn Dynasty. Contrary to the ostensible veneration of Confucianism by the Trịnh-Nguyễn lords, these rulers often harbored pragmatic sensibilities and vacillated between Confucian and Buddhist inclinations. Hence, during this juncture, the 'ritual issue' was primarily couched in religious-cultural terms. With the dawning of the 19th century, however, and the consolidation of a centralized regime under the Nguyễn Dynasty, firmly grounded in Confucian political-ethical norms, the 'ritual issue' assumed a distinctly political hue. The ascendance of Christianity posed an existential threat to the legitimacy of the Confucian court, thereby necessitating a more stringent prohibition against the faith. This underscores the inescapable reality that to curtail the propagation of Christianity, the indigenous governance structure had no recourse but to anchor its policies in the bedrock of its Confucian identity. While colonial dynamics contributed to this narrative, it is noteworthy that prior to the reign of Tự Đức – when the French threat of invasion materialized—under the aegis of Gia Long, Minh Mạng and Thiệu Trị, the nexus between Christian evangelism and colonialism served merely as an ancillary rationale for the suppression of Christianity.

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