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New Histories of Vietnamese Catholicism

Scholarship about Vietnamese Catholicism has long been contentious and controversial. Until recently, the bulk of this scholarship focused on the evangelization of European missionaries, the persecution of missionaries and native Catholics by precolonial Vietnamese dynasties, and the often-close relationships between missionaries and French colonial authorities. Vietnamese Catholic historians have tended to stress the regular repression and violence carried out by Vietnamese authorities while painting hagiographic portraits of persecuted missionaries and native Catholics.¹ Non-Catholic Vietnamese scholars, many of them writing to advance the historical narratives of the communist state, have emphasized the relationship between missionaries and colonialists and argued that the former contributed to the success of the latter.² These contrasting perspectives have often devolved into a debate over the nationalist credentials of Vietnamese Catholics: pro-Catholic scholars emphasizing the victimhood of part of the national community, and more critical voices questioning whether Catholics were more loyal to Vietnam or to foreign powers, especially the Church of Rome.

This situation has changed since the late 1990s, thanks largely to newly available archival materials at the Vatican and the Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP).³ Although scholars continue to publish about missionaries and their work, the studies reflect deeper treatment of regional

and global contexts and offer more nuanced analysis of interreligious exchange and inculturation.⁴ The new scholarship also avoids binary nationalist premises and demonstrates the agency and activism of missionaries and, especially, Vietnamese Catholics in creating their own space and vision within the emergence of modern Vietnam. Native clergy and laity now figure far more prominently in histories of Vietnamese Catholicism, sometimes in cooperation with missionaries and sometimes because of their own initiatives. In addition, scholars are much more attentive to movements across borders and to interactions at the local, regional, and global levels. The new scholarship reflects a broader outlook shared by specialists of Vietnam studies working on non-Catholic topics.⁵ As a result, it has expanded and complicated our knowledge of Vietnamese Catholicism in the precolonial era.⁶ Even the long-standing subject of anti-Catholic persecution and, more broadly, relations between Catholics and the Nguyễn in the nineteenth century have received fresh interpretations.⁷ For the colonial and postcolonial eras, scholars have utilized French colonial and Vietnamese archives, materials from the Catholic press, and other sources to deepen our understanding of Vietnamese Catholicism during late colonialism, the Vietnam War, and the postwar diaspora.⁸

One outcome of the recent scholarship is an emphasis on Vietnamese Catholics as agents and actors connected to larger networks of belief. Nineteenth-century Catholics, for example, are no longer seen as victims, reactors, or, to borrow words from a review published in this journal thirteen years ago, “obedient servants of the French, poor peasants seeking money, or isolated villagers.”⁹ Rather, this scholarship shows how Vietnamese Catholics resourcefully responded to local difficulties and challenges, at times with enormous constraints, and navigated the Catholic Church’s regional and global networks. As George Dutton has noted in his biography of Philipphê Binh, Vietnamese Catholics in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were already “members of a global religious community, now linked to other parts of Asia and to Europe via ecclesiastical networks, biblical genealogies, and a shared tradition of revered saints.”¹⁰ Although few Vietnamese Catholics at the time could have traveled abroad like Philipphê Binh, they capably imagined and conceived of new identities on the basis of those global connections. As further demonstrated by Charles

Keith's groundbreaking 2012 monograph, dynamic and frequent interactions between Vietnamese and the global church during the colonial era shaped the making of a national Vietnamese church and the rise of cultural and political nationalism among Vietnamese clergy and laity. Such interactions might have been brushed aside by a long-standing nationalist binary that, again, questions and dismisses the loyalty of Catholics.¹¹ Yet recent works illuminate how Vietnamese Catholics engaged transnational networks in a way that enabled them to play a decisive role in the creation of a national Vietnamese church in 1960.¹²

Although the articles in this special issue vary in subject matter and emphasis, they all reflect recent developments in the study of Vietnamese Catholicism that stress interactions among local, regional, and global networks and actors. Organized in chronological order, they begin with Anh Q. Tran's analysis of the evolution of *quốc ngữ* orthography, which began with seventeenth-century missionary endeavors. Scholars have long associated the rise of *quốc ngữ* in the twentieth century with nationalist visions of modernity. Tran traces three centuries of orthography during which missionaries altered and modified the written language to create and revise catechisms, translations of the Bible, and other works. He shows how the *quốc ngữ* alphabet came out of not only Latin but also Portuguese and Italian. Linguistic differences in Tonkin and Cochinchina posed further challenges to creating a uniform alphabet and orthography. Tran also shows that Alexander de Rhodes, still commonly credited to have "invented" the Vietnamese alphabet, based his famous dictionary on the linguistic labors of three other missionaries: Francisco de Pina, Gaspar do Amaral, and Antonio Barbosa. By the end of this article, it is clear that the origin of the modern Vietnamese alphabet and *quốc ngữ* spelling was the work of many individuals from different linguistic traditions.

The next two articles illuminate Vietnamese Catholic intellectual engagements with other cultures. Yuqing Du studies two versions of *Hội đồng tứ giáo* [Conference of Four Religions], a catechism written in the early nineteenth century in the form of an interfaith debate among a Western scholar representing Christianity and three masters of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. This catechism is notable for the inclusion of extensive quotations from and citations to the Confucian Classics. The inclusion, Du

argues, mirrors a strategy of inculturation employed by Jesuits in China during the Chinese Rites controversy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In defending his beliefs, the Western scholar resorts to a number of concepts and phrases gathered from earlier exchanges in China. Du shows how inculturation was not a straightforward linear process from missionaries to native Vietnamese but one mediated by broader Confucian-Christian conceptual and linguistic dialogues. She also shows how the use of Nôm script in this catechism and other texts enabled a wider range of possibilities for transmitting and translating Christian ideas into Vietnamese through the mediation of the Chinese Classics. In the end, inculturation was a multi-faceted process that involved not only interactions between the local and the global, but also the broader context of border crossing and intra-Asian knowledge and experience.

Quite different from *Hội đồng tứ giáo* is the 1873 *Công đồng Tứ Xuyên* [The Synod of Sichuan], the subject of Lân Ngô's article. Employing the framework of reception theory, Ngô argues that this manual of instruction to the local clergy was rooted in a *dévo*t French tradition that withdrew from political involvement in the seventeenth century to pour their energy into spiritual labors. As a result, the document reflects the attitudes of the "zealot" and the "prophet," terms Ngô borrows from the scholarship of Anthony Downs and John O'Malley. He further argues that the local Vietnamese clergy saw themselves as belonging to a nonconformist Confucian tradition. This tradition dated back to scholar-mandarins such as Chu Văn An in the fourteenth century and Nguyễn Bình Khiêm in the sixteenth century. Its cultural framework was fitting for the native clergy who inhabited leadership among their faith communities within a non-Christian society. As a reflection of *dévo*t and nonconformist Confucian distaste for the world, the document focuses on practical morality, pious devotion, and frugality and simplicity, all of which were well aligned to the zealot-and-prophet ideal among the clergy.

In the twentieth century, the Vietnamese church encountered not only new ideas but also new forms of religious organization: the subject of the last two articles. Following Keith's work on modern Catholic associational culture, Claire Thị Liên Trần examines the first decade of Catholic Action in Indochina, particularly the beginning of *Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne*

(JOC or Young Christian Workers) in three northern Vietnamese cities: Hà Nội, Hải Phòng, and Nam Định. She illustrates how a new generation of missionaries and Vietnamese Catholics used the Vatican's program Catholic Action to respond to the new economic circumstances of the late colonial era. Although the leadership and programs of local organizations were different, the movement as a whole signified the economic activism of a new generation of missionaries and, most notably, lay Vietnamese Catholics in the ecclesial landscape. By the end of the Second World War, the involvement of those Vietnamese Catholics brought about a broader shift from social activism to political activism.

The last article in the collection is my study of Marian devotionism in South Vietnam during the era of decolonization and national division. There is a long history of Vietnamese devotion to the Virgin Mary, partially as a result of regional and global transmissions of devotionism. Beginning in the 1940s, a number of Vietnamese clergy, Vietnamese laity, and missionaries promoted a new form of devotionism, anticommunist Marianism, as an ideological and cultural weapon against the rise of the Vietnamese Communist Party. I show that the rise of anticommunist Marianism under decolonization was partially an outcome of the modern associational culture, especially Catholic Action. It was also a result of twentieth-century national and global transmissions of Marianism, particularly the devotions to Our Lady of La Vang and Our Lady of Fatima. After national partition in 1954, Vietnamese Catholics in the Republic of Vietnam further employed anticommunist Marianism to cope with the harsh realities of national division and warfare. The article highlights the political dimension of Marian devotionism and contributes to scholarship about the religious culture of South Vietnam.

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Notes

1. Representative of this perspective is Phan Phát Huồn, *Việt Nam giáo sử* [History of Vietnamese Catholicism], 2 vols. (Sài Gòn: Cửu Thế Tùng Thư, 1965). The first volume concerns 1533–1933, and its first half focuses on the early evangelization in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Most of the second half is about nineteenth-century persecution. Similar in outlook, if more detailed and nuanced, is Cao Thế Dung, *Việt Nam Công giáo sử tân biên (1553–2000)* [A New History of Vietnamese Catholicism: 1553–2000], 3 vols. (Gretna, LA: Dân Chúa, 2002).
2. Most prominent of this perspective is Cao Huy Thuần's dissertation, "Christianisme et colonialisme au Vietnam (1857–1914)" (PhD dissertation, University of Paris, 1969). It has been translated into Vietnamese and published in several editions in both Vietnam and the diaspora since the 1980s. The most recent edition is *Giáo sĩ thừa sai và chính sách thuộc địa của Pháp tại Việt Nam (1857–1914)* [Missionaries and French Colonial Policies in Vietnam, 1857–1914] (Hà Nội: Hồng Đức, 2014). A French edition in book form is *Les missionnaires et la politique coloniale française au Vietnam (1857–1914)* (New Haven, CT: Council on Southeast Asia Studies, 1990). Somewhat different from both the pro-Catholic perspective and the anti-missionary perspective is Patrick J. N. Tuck, ed., *French Catholic Missionaries and the Politics of Imperialism in Vietnam, 1857–1914: A Documentary Survey* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1987).
3. There had been limited access to MEP documents before the 1990s, some of which have been published—for example, Tuck, *French Catholic Missionaries*.
4. Tara Alberts, *Conflict and Conversion: Catholicism in Southeast Asia, 1500–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Jean Michaud, "French Missionary Expansion in Colonial Upper Tonkin," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35, no. 2 (2004): 287–310. See also Peter C. Phan, *Mission and Catechesis: Alexandre de Rhodes and Inculturation in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), which analyzes the Vietnamese catechism of de Rhodes from contemporary perspectives on adaptation and inculturation to the Vietnamese situation.
5. See, for examples, Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York: Basic Books, 2016); Wynn Wilcox, ed., *Vietnam and the West: New Approaches* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 2010); Nhung Tuyet Tran and Anthony Reid, eds., *Việt Nam: Borderless Histories* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).
6. On the seventeenth century, see Tara Alberts, "Priests of a Foreign God: Catholic Religious Leadership and Sacral Authority in Seventeenth-Century Tonkin and Cochinchina," in *Intercultural Exchange in Southeast Asia: History*

- and Society in the Early Modern World*, ed. Tara Alberts and D.R.M. Irving (I. B. Tauris, 2013), 84–117; Nola Cooke, “Early Christian Conversion in Seventeenth-Century Cochinchina,” in *Asia in the Making of Christianity: Conversion, Agency, and Indigeneity, 1600s to the Present*, ed. Richard Fox Young and Jonathan A. Seitz (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 29–52; Nola Cooke, “Strange Brew: Global, Regional and Local Factors behind the 1690 Prohibition of Christian Practice in Nguyễn Cochinchina,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 39, no. 3 (2008): 383–409. On the eighteenth century, see Anh Q. Tran, *Gods, Heroes, and Ancestors: An Interreligious Encounter in Eighteenth-Century Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); George E. Dutton, *A Vietnamese Moses: Philiphê Binh and the Geographies of Early Modern Catholicism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017); Nhung Tuyet Tran, “*Les Amantes de la Croix*: An Early Modern Vietnamese Sisterhood,” in *Le Viet Nam au féminin*, ed. Gisele Bousquet and Nora Taylor (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2005), 51–66. On the nineteenth century, see Jacob Ramsay, *Mandarins and Martyrs: The Church and the Nguyen Dynasty in Early Nineteenth-Century Vietnam* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); Nola Cooke, “Early Nineteenth-Century Vietnamese Catholics and Others in the Pages of the *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi*,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35, no. 2 (2004): 261–285.
7. Ramsay, *Mandarins and Martyrs*; Lan Anh Ngo, “Nguyễn–Catholic History (1770s–1890s) and the Gestation of Vietnamese Catholic National Identity” (PhD dissertation, Georgetown University, 2016).
 8. On the colonial era, see Claire Thị Liên Trần, “The Role of Education Mobilities and Transnational Networks in the Building of a Modern Vietnamese Catholic Elite (1920s–1950s),” *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 35, no. 2 (2020): 243–270; Charles Keith, *Catholic Vietnam: A Church from Empire to Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). On the era of the Vietnam War, see Phi-Vân Nguyen, “Transnational Catholic Solidarity and Refugee Protection in Cold War Asia,” in *Refugees and Religion: Ethnographic Studies of Global Trajectories*, ed., Birgit Meyer and Peter van der Veer (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 51–67; Phi-Vân Nguyen, “Fighting the First Indochina War Again? Catholic Refugees in South Vietnam, 1954–59,” *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 31, no. 1 (2016): 207–246; Jason Picard, “‘Fertile Lands Await’: The Promises and Pitfalls of Directed Resettlement, 1954–1958,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11, no. 3/4 (2016): 58–102; Wynn Gadkar-Wilcox, “Existentialism and Intellectual Culture in South Vietnam,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 2 (2014): 377–395; Trần Thị Liên, “The Challenge for Peace within South Vietnam’s Catholic Community: A History of Peace Activism,” *Peace & Change* 38, no. 4 (2013): 446–473; Van

- Nguyen-Marshall, "Tools of Empire? Vietnamese Catholics in South Vietnam," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 20, no. 2 (2009): 138–159; Peter Hansen, "Bắc Di Cư: Catholic Refugees from the North of Vietnam, and Their Role in the Southern Republic, 1954–1959," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4, no. 3 (2009): 173–211; Peter Hansen, "The Virgin Heads South: Northern Catholic Refugees and Their Clergy in South Vietnam, 1954–1964," in *Casting Faiths: Imperialism and the Transformation of Religion in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Thomas David DuBois (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 129–151. On the diaspora, see Tuan Hoang, "Ultramontanist, Nationalism, and the Fall of Saigon: Historicizing the Vietnamese American Catholic Experience," *American Catholic Studies* 130, no. 1 (2019): 1–36; Tuan Hoang, "The Resettlement of Vietnamese Refugee Religious, Priests, and Seminarians in the United States, 1975–1977," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 37, no. 3 (2019): 99–122; Thien-Huong Ninh, *Race, Gender, and Religion in the Vietnamese Diaspora: The New Chosen People* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Thien-Huong Ninh, "Diasporic Nationalism among Vietnamese Catholic Refugees in the United States and Germany," in *Refugees and Religion: Ethnographic Studies of Global Trajectories*, ed. Birgit Meyer and Peter van der Veer (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 68–86; Thien-Huong T. Ninh, "Global Chain of Marianism: Diasporic Formation among Vietnamese Catholics in the United States and Cambodia," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 12, no. 2 (2017): 49–82; Peter C. Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005).
9. Wynn Gadkar-Wilcox, review of *Mandarins and Martyrs: The Church and the Nguyen Dynasty in Early Nineteenth-Century Vietnam*, Jacob Ramsay, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4, no. 1 (2009): 253.
 10. Dutton, *A Vietnamese Moses*, 4.
 11. For a broader framing of this point, see Keith, *Catholic Vietnam*, 3–15.
 12. For a larger conceptualization that includes the Vietnamese, see the following introduction to a special issue on Southeast Asian Catholicism: Bernado E. Brown and Claire Thị Liên Trần, "Global Catholicism in Southeast Asia: Mobilities and Networks," *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 35, no. 2 (2020): 197–216.