

ЭКОНОМИКА И ПОЛИТИКА

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RELIGION AND POLICY OF CATHOLIC PROHIBITION UNDER THE NGUYEN DYNASTY: ANALYSIS OF RITUALISTIC CONSIDERATIONS

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Abstract: *This article examines the religious landscape of the Nguyen Dynasty, focusing on the significance of Confucianism and conflicts with Catholicism. The analysis draws from a range of sources, including edicts, historical chronicles, reports, treaties, and studies by Vietnamese and foreign scholars. The period studied spans from the Nguyen Dynasty's establishment under Gia Long to its surrender to French colonialism in 1884. Central to this examination is the scrutiny of the religious panorama prevalent during the Nguyen Dynasty. It disentangles the disparities between Catholicism and Confucianism, laying bare their fundamental divergences in beliefs and practices. It chronicles Gia Long's confrontational stance towards Catholicism, unraveling the subsequent religious discord it engendered. Moreover, the research delves into Minh Mang's policy of religious prohibition, unveiling the ritualistic conundrums that ensued due to the prohibitive edicts issued by Thieu Tri and Tu Duc. The study concludes that the Nguyen Dynasty's prohibition policy on Catholicism had significant consequences for the Vietnamese society in the 19th century. The policy exacerbated the differences between Catholics and non-Catholics due to conflicts between traditional Vietnamese culture and Catholicism's divergent views on rituals, customs, and social values. Ultimately, the prohibition policy not only failed to curb the spread of Catholicism but also provided a pretext for French colonialists to invade Vietnam, leading to its gradual transformation into a French colony, and their goal of evangelization in the region. Overall, the research highlights the impact of religion on political power and the dynamics of cultural conflict in Vietnam during the Nguyen Dynasty.*

Keywords: Vietnam, Nguyen Dynasty, ritual issues, evangelism, religious prohibition, Catholicism, Confucianism, edicts, heretical religion, traditional religion.

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Originating in the East, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism had been introduced to Vietnam in the Common Era and successfully integrated into the national culture during the Ly-Tran period. However, the emergence of capitalism in the 16th–19th centuries brought about the arrival of Catholicism, which marked a departure from these indigenous religions. The introduction and spread of Catholicism in Vietnam faced various challenges, such as ritual issues, acculturation, belief clashes, and ethnic conflicts. Although the Dominicans who propagated in China were aware of these issues early on¹, Catholicism faced difficulties in Vietnam due to cultural differences and conflicts.

¹ “Brothers, never try to amend or use any argument to force the people to amend their customs, rituals, and acculturation, unless they clearly contradict the holy doctrine and ethics. What is more illogical and foolish than bringing the

The clash between Catholicism and Vietnamese ancestor worship and rituals created conflicting beliefs. The ancestor worship was seen as superstition by the Vietnamese clergy, while the Nguyen dynasty deemed Catholicism heretical. This conflict posed a challenge to achieving religious harmony and shared values between the Catholic Church and the Hue court's ruling class. Conservative Confucian forces gaining power in the court furthered the resistance to the spread of Catholicism, leading to the Nguyen dynasty's religious prohibition policy.

The Nguyen Dynasty's decision to prohibit religion was an error that exacerbated tensions between Catholics and non-Catholics. Although political factors, such as the relationship between missionary work and colonialism, and involvement of missionaries in Vietnamese politics have been widely discussed [Nguyen, 2001, p. 45], the impact of cultural and religious factors on the Hue dynasty's policy has not been fully explored. Previous studies have primarily focused on the ritual issue and not on the broader cultural and religious differences between Vietnamese traditions and Catholicism, including customs and social values. Therefore, it is essential to conduct further research to better understand the reasons behind the Nguyen dynasty's ban on religion. This article aims to provide insight into one of these reasons.

ANALYSIS OF THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE DURING THE NGUYEN DYNASTY: PREVALENCE OF CONFUCIANISM AS A DOMINANT FORCE

The Nguyen Dynasty came into power in 1802 amidst a deeply divided Vietnam. The country had been divided into two regions for centuries, with the Nguyen and Trinh lords ruling the Inner Circuit and Outer Land, respectively. Despite the success of the Tay Son rebellion in defeating the feudal forces and abolishing the Gianh River boundary, the country remained fragmented. It was not until Gia Long, a descendant of the Nguyen lord who defeated the Tay Son army, had fully unified the country in 1802 that the Nguyen Dynasty was established.

In the early 19th century, Vietnam boasted diverse schools of thought and ideological beliefs, including Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and introduction of a new Christian ideology. Despite the presence of other religions, the Nguyen Dynasty continued to uphold Confucianism as the dominant ideology, in line with previous dynasties, but also permitted the growth of other religions.

Vietnam's culture went through significant changes during this period of turmoil. Despite being the national ideology, Confucianism no longer held the dominant position it had during the Primal Le Dynasty, as it was still utilized by the feudal class. "The poor people who lived under the oppression and exploitation of the feudal forces and had no way to escape from their suffering (other than rebellion) had to resort to praying to the gods and Buddha for blessings and relief", "In the ruling class, faced with the danger of the feudal regime, people were very afraid and looked forward to the 'rescue and salvation' of Buddhism" [Dao, 2013, p. 449]. Therefore, Buddhism spread further during this period compared to the Primal Le Dynasty. However, in this era Buddhism only sought to alleviate the current suffering. According to Dao Duy Anh's observation, "the professions of temple masters, wizards and shamans were widespread. After experiencing the chaos and turmoil, some rural intellectuals went to the temples to find a peaceful place to live, while many poor people became servants to earn a living", "the nobility of the Outer Land and the court no longer trusted Confucianism as a ruling ideology, but turned to seek solace in Buddhism and Taoism. In the Inner Circuit, the nobility competed to build many temples. Almost every noble household had one or two private temples" [Dao, 2013, p. 449]. Despite the

whole France, Spain, Italy or any other European country to Asia? We do not bring those things to them, but we do bring the truth of faith, a truth that does not exclude the rituals and customs of any nation, as long as they are not evil; instead, that truth wants people to preserve and maintain it differently" [Pham, 2012, p. 132].

ruling authorities' emphasis on Confucianism, which prioritized education and morality, other religions like Buddhism and Taoism were also recognized and revitalized at this time. As a result of this hybridity, the intellectual landscape was diverse and flourishing.

Regarding the views of the Nguyen dynasty, it started with Gia Long. "Although he did not declare Confucianism as the exclusive ideology, throughout his reign Gia Long always adhered to the political orientation and ritual principles of Confucianism, while gradually establishing the dominant position of Confucianism in the spiritual and religious life of the people" [Le, 2015, p. 37].

The Nguyen dynasty's return to the dominance of Confucianism can be viewed as a way of reinstating it as the primary ideology in the ruling strategy. This is similar to the way Buddhism and Taoism had not been allowed to have political involvement under the Primal Le dynasty. The dominance of Confucianism involves recognizing the importance of respecting the ruler's authority and establishing a legal system where Confucian ethical standards were implemented as law.

DISPARITIES BETWEEN CATHOLICISM AND CONFUCIANISM

In 1533, Christianity was introduced to Vietnam² [Pham et al, 1981, p. 291], becoming a sensitive issue that went beyond religion, belief, and culture. It had political and social implications that varied with different historical periods and regimes. Christianity's exclusivity and arrogance, conflict of its rituals with the traditional culture and Confucianism, as well as it being politically exploited by external forces, contributed to the policies toward Christianity by Vietnamese authorities, including the Nguyen dynasty.

Since its introduction, Catholicism has disrupted many fundamental social norms of Confucian society. Confucian society is based on the foundation of three primary relationships, namely the king and his subjects, husband and wife, and parents and children [Doan, 2020, p. 180]. The Nguyen kings proclaimed themselves as Emperors, symbols of the nation, so they were equivalent to the country itself. Disloyalty to the king would be regarded as treason. Confucius wrote: "The king makes the upper classes, and the upper classes worship the king", "The king sends down orders and the upper classes respect them with all sincerity" [Doan, 2020, p. 19].

In the spousal relationship, Confucianism values women's virtues such as diligence, politeness, speech, and conduct³. Men are given priority in property inheritance in the family and hold the main responsibility in ancestor worship⁴ [Cadière, 1997, p. 83]. The status of a woman, a wife, cannot be equal to that of her husband. An exemplary woman must "serve her father-in-law at home, serve her husband when married, and serve her son in widowhood".

In the relationship between parents and children, Confucianism emphasizes filial piety. Confucius once said: "If one does not respect his parents, then how can he take care of other things?" [Nguyen, 2007, p. 29–30]. Filial piety towards ancestors, grandparents, and parents shows reverence for the superior, which is considered the second virtue after loyalty to the king.

² The book states: Bishop Ignatio secretly spread Christianity in Quan Anh, Tra Lu, Ninh Cuong villages during the reign of King Le Trang Tong in 1533. He always gave money and medicine to those who listened to his preaching. From then on, the Catholicism has begun to spread to Vietnam.

³ In terms of semantics, the Four Virtues are explained as follows: Công (工) is skillfulness, Dung (容) is appearance, which includes both physical appearance (posture and facial expression) and facial features (beauty). Ngôn (言) is speech. Hạnh (行) refers to moral behavior and actions. *Dictionary of Sino-Vietnamese*. hannom.huecit.vn/VietHan/Tabid/60/Default.aspx (accessed: 28.03.2023)

⁴ Vietnamese women are not excluded from the practice of ancestor worship [Cadière, 1997, p. 83]. The Hong Duc Code allowed women to inherit a portion of property. However, in general, in the traditional Vietnamese society, men held the dominant responsibility in ancestor worship and were prioritized in inheriting property.

If disloyalty to the king is considered treason, then filial impiety towards ancestors is regarded as immorality, one of the most serious sins in Confucianism.

The ethical and political values of Confucianism differ significantly from those of Catholicism. While the Catholics believe in an all-powerful transcendent force, the traditional religious beliefs of the Vietnamese do not completely separate supernatural forces from the earthly realm⁵, and instead, view moral rectitude as the most important quality of a leader. Although Confucianism emphasizes leading a virtuous life and obeying the emperor, the position of the emperor in the spiritual realm is second only to the Savior. These differences in doctrine are one of the reasons why the Trinh-Nguyen and Tay Son lords were not supportive of Catholicism. In fact, in 1663 Lord Hien Vuong ordered to behead a Catholic named Phaolo after he stated that he was first a believer of God and only then a subject of the lord⁶. “In the past, Westerners brought deceptive Catholic teachings to our country, fooling many rural people. These believers became obsessed despite orders to expel them, staying entrenched in this tradition” [*National Historical Bureau of Nguyen Dynasty*, 1998, p. 300–301].

In March 1712, a renewed ban on Catholicism was imposed. Despite court orders, adherents, including soldiers, supported each other, leading to the religion’s growth [*National Historical Bureau of Nguyen Dynasty*, 1998, p. 140]. In September 1754, the Dutch religion “Thap Tu Giao” was also prohibited. It used concepts of Heaven and Hell, akin to Buddhism, with confession and baptism [*National Historical Bureau of Nguyen Dynasty*, 1998, p. 627].

The Tay Son movement viewed Catholicism as “a religion that does not respect the father, does not respect the king, and does not worship spirits” [Launay, 1925, p. 117]. The Tay Son dynasty was truly concerned about the negative influence of Catholicism on Confucianism. “As Western countries introduced their religion secretly, the reverence for Confucius has steadily dwindled, almost fading away. The misleading and appealing words of foreigners are ensnaring people’s hearts through mysterious methods, leaving resistance futile. Observing this deception’s hold on people, we are resolute in upholding the virtuous principles of our ancestors and ancient emperors, committed to eradicating this malevolent faith” [Louvett, 1885, p. 517].

The Holy See’s ban on ancestor worship for Catholics before the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) sparked non-Catholic discontent⁷. While the Catholic Bible encourages honouring parents, Catholics expressed this differently from the Vietnamese tradition. Catholicism also promotes monogamy and gender equality, in contrast to Confucianism. These differences reflect a divide between international and regional cultures, Western and Eastern norms, and expansionist religion versus national orthodoxy.

RELIGIOUS DISAGREEMENTS BETWEEN GIA LONG AND CATHOLICISM IN REGARD TO RITUAL ISSUES

The ritual issue has appeared since Catholicism was introduced to Vietnam and was one of the reasons for the religious bans during the Trinh-Nguyen and Tay Son dynasties in the 17th–

⁵ Christianity and traditional Vietnamese religions contrast in two ways. Firstly, Christianity is monotheistic, centered on the Holy Trinity, while Vietnamese traditions lean towards polytheism. Secondly, Christians focus on a separate Creator God, unlike Confucianism and Buddhism. L.M. Cadière noted distinctions between the Vietnamese beliefs and European Christianity. “Unlike Europeans, who may not consistently feel connected to their God despite devotion, the Vietnamese, irrespective of social status, maintain a constant connection with nature’s holy spirits. These spirits collaborate with humans, ensuring success, and every event, positive or negative, is seen by the Vietnamese as a sign of holy spirits or ancestors’ intervention” [Cadière, 1997, p. 90].

⁶ That is Mac Duong, a Vietnamese follower of Christianity in Southern Vietnam from the 17th to the 19th century [*The Government Religious Affairs Committee*, 1988, p. 69].

⁷ After many debates with Gia Long, Pigneau himself also proposed to the Holy See to allow Vietnamese Catholics to worship their ancestors. Unfortunately, Pigneau’s proposals were not accepted by the Holy See [Truong, 1992, p. 132–133].

18th centuries. Alexandre de Rhodes recounted a proclamation by Trinh Trang (1623–1657) that banned European missionaries from preaching: “What religion are you teaching in our country? You teach our people to take only one wife, but we want many wives to bear us many loyal children. From now on, you should leave and stop preaching that religion” [Rhodes, 2016, p. 74]. In 1785, the Tay Son brothers also issued a proclamation banning the Catholic religion that reads: “Now we want to eliminate the religion of Europe from our country (...) A religion that does not recognize fathers, does not recognize kings, does not worship spirits; they spend their nights reading scriptures and books (...) idle and unproductive, doing nothing to produce or accumulate” [Launay, 1925, p. 119].

The Nguyen Dynasty rulers held a more critical view of Catholicism regarding the ritual issue due to their strong adherence to Confucianism, which set them apart from the Trinh and Nguyen lords and the Tay Son brothers⁸. Even before his ascent to the throne in 1802, Gia Long had expressed his opposition to Catholic rituals by politely declining Bishop Pigneau de Behaine’s requests for baptism and stating, “This religion is good, but it cannot be followed” as was customary in Asian culture. Despite the Nguyen Lord’s courteous demeanour towards Catholics, his response revealed a fundamental disagreement with the religion. European missionaries were not satisfied with his attitude towards Catholics and his absence of favourable feelings towards the religion. On one occasion, Gia Long told the missionaries that he found their religion to be admirable, but too stringent for anyone to practice. Specifically, he mentioned his inability to adhere to the requirement of having only one wife. Father Louvet believed that Gia Long harboured a deep-seated resentment towards Catholicism throughout his life: “Gia Long did not value the Catholic missionaries, and deep down, the king had no goodwill towards Christianity” [Louvet, 1900, p. 263]. As far back as 1792, Le Labousse, a French missionary, expressed his belief that the king was unlikely to adopt Christianity, despite being familiar with the religion. Gia Long was known to mock and ridicule several aspects of Catholic doctrine, but he has never spoken out against Bishop Pigneau [Launay, 1925, p. 222–223]. Rieunier, a French author, commented: “Nguyen Anh’s favor towards Christianity seemed very generous, but in reality, it had no effect. After ascending to the throne, Gia Long did nothing about it. He was satisfied with issuing edicts that appeared to protect the spread of Christianity. However, anyone who has lived in this country knows very well that such edicts cannot bring about the necessary effect” [Nguyen, 1999, p. 107]. All edicts prohibiting superstition issued by Minh Mang after Gia Long’s death were, in fact, the implementation of Gia Long’s basic political line. J. Buttinger observed that Gia Long’s passive animosity towards Catholicism was not much different from Minh Mang’s attempts to outlaw the religion by making it illegal [Buttinger, 1970, p. 274].

Grateful to Pigneau and the French, Gia Long could not openly oppose Catholicism. He diplomatically declined the Catholics’ requests, aiming to balance opposing viewpoints. For example, when the Catholics resisted contributing to traditional festivals, Gia Long arranged a separate Catholic prayer ceremony. Despite his efforts, the matter was resolved by non-Catholic officials, compelling the Catholics to contribute according to the national custom [Truong, 1992, p. 130–137]. J. Buttinger believed that “the leader of Tay Son, Quang Trung, was more tolerant of Catholicism than Nguyen Anh” [Buttinger, 1970, p. 265].

Nguyen Anh’s opposition to Catholicism went beyond monogamy. He disagreed with Catholic practices conflicting with Confucianism, especially the absence of ancestor worship. Pigneau argued that ancestors did not exist, but Nguyen Anh insisted that ancestor worship was vital for filial piety in Confucianism. Despite needing Pigneau’s aid, he stood firm on not compromising with Catholics on this ritual⁹.

⁸ In addition, missionaries of the Foreign Missions Society and the Dominicans were also more extreme in ritual adherence than the Jesuit missionaries of the first half of the 17th century.

⁹ In an August 1789 letter, Bishop Pigneau cited Nguyen Anh’s stance: “If influential court officials become Catholic

Nguyen Anh's clash with Catholicism intensified after Prince Canh's return from France. During his 1797 birthday celebration, the prince refused ancestral altar reverence, choosing beheading over obedience to his father. This deeply wounded Nguyen Anh, as it clashed with Confucian values of loyalty and filial piety, threatened by Catholicism's influence. He realized his son was swayed by Catholicism and European culture, distancing from the family. The king, filled with sorrow, anger, and shame, expressed his grief by discarding his robes and crown, expressing paternal unhappiness [Launay, 1925, p. 284].

Nguyen Anh feared that the Catholics would isolate themselves from the Vietnamese society despite their help against the Tay Son. He aimed for integration and worried that separate parishes and dioceses could create a divisive "nation" within Vietnam, causing instability. Therefore, the ritual issue was not only a matter of culture and religion but also had political and social implications. This might be the reason why the Treaty of Versailles in 1787 did not address the issue of evangelization¹⁰.

The 1804 "Statutes of the hương đảng" highlight Gia Long's anti-Catholic stance, especially on the ritual issue. Viewing Catholicism as foreign and misleading, he restricted church restoration and construction to preserve the customs. Violators faced punishment, including banishment for chiefs and forced labor or beatings for individuals [*National Historical Bureau of Nguyen Dynasty*, 2006, p. 168–169]. Despite some disputes, Gia Long's rule mostly tolerated Catholicism, maintaining relative peace.

STUDY OF THE RITUAL ISSUE AND MINH MANG'S PROHIBITION POLICY ON RELIGIONS

Unlike Gia Long, Minh Mang strongly opposed Catholicism in regard to the ritual matter for two reasons. Firstly, he fervently supported Confucianism and expanded the imperial examination system. Secondly, he had no debts to Pigneau or the Catholics like his father, allowing him to enact desired policies freely.

Prince Dam (Minh Mang), known for his strong and decisive nature, had had a negative view of Catholicism even before becoming a king. He believed that a dual-religion nation was unfavourable [Buttinger, 1970, p. 269]. However, partly because there was no clear reason to do so, as well as in accordance with the instructions in Gia Long's will to maintain harmony with major religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Catholicism, Minh Mang could not openly ban Catholicism in the 1820s. However, Minh Mang did not hide his disagreements with this religion. The king read a passage about the Tower of Babel in the Old Testament and mocked the beliefs of Christianity¹¹ [Woodside, 1988, p. 288]. During the Lunar New Year of 1824, when the envoys came to pay their respects, the king returned their gifts, a gesture usually seen when the two parties have controversies. That same year, the king ordered a Catholic official to plant a maypole in front of his house. The official replied: "Your Majesty, the Pope would never force a bishop to do such a thing. I am willing to be punished, but I will never plant the maypole". This was like a cold bucket of water to Minh Mang, but he managed to restrain himself and said:

and abandon traditions, the isolation will weaken the dynasty's authority. He wants all officials, regardless of faith, to honor their ancestors" [Truong, 1992, p. 133].

¹⁰ In early 1781, Bishop Pigneau was criticized by the court officials and the Buddhist monks for his close relationship with Lord Nguyen. The minutes of the meeting of officials on August 2, 1782 state that he did not accept religious freedom [Truong, 1992, p. 81–82].

¹¹ The passage tells that initially, all human beings in the world had lived in one place, originating from the same ethnic group and communicating with each other in a unified language. They worked together to build a towering city that reached the sky, called the Tower of Babel. This angered God. God destroyed the tower and scattered humanity throughout the world, making it diverse in ethnicity and language (Genesis 11: 1–9).

“I love the Bishop, so I won’t punish you. However, you should know that from now on, European priests will not be allowed to enter our country. Those who are already here are fine, but I do not want any more to come. Our country is not that small, it is a cultured country, right? You make me ashamed when you go looking for Western priests” [Phan, 1958, p. 200–201].

Minh Mang granted titles to priests to prevent them from being offended and hoped they would halt preaching. In 1825, he gathered European priests, pretending to need some interpreters. In reality, he aimed to oversee their actions. The content of this order was as follows: “The Western religions harm people’s hearts. For so long, European trading ships have come to Vietnam and left priests behind. They cast spells on the people, degrading our pure customs. Isn’t that a big threat to our country? Therefore, I forbid these immoral things and allow our people to return to their true religion. We must be vigilant at the sea ports, in the mountains, and on all water and land routes to prevent Western priests from sneaking in and infiltrating our people to spread darkness over the kingdom” [Vo, 1969, p. 282]. In 1827, the priests were released; Minh Mang’s disapproval of Catholicism did not decrease¹².

The emergence of the ritual-related conflict between the Nguyen Dynasty and the Catholics is evident in the initial religious ban issued in 1833. “Catholicism has been introduced by Westerners for a long time, and many people were deceived without realizing it. Think about it: the theory of paradise is just a fantasy, with no evidence. Moreover, they do not respect spirits and ancestors, which is against the right path. They even set up their own preaching houses and gather many people (...) There are many things that violate our ethics and customs, and even laws. This religion is considered more evil than any other religion. It is already clearly prohibited by law” [*National Historical Bureau of Nguyen Dynasty*, 2006, p. 235–236].

Tran Trong Kim highlighted the cultural and political principles behind the ban on Christianity under Minh Mang’s reign. Minh Mang, being a devout follower of Confucianism and a great admirer of Confucius, held a negative attitude towards Christianity, which he believed was a false religion that used God to deceive the people. Consequently, he implemented strict measures to prohibit and punish those who followed this religion [Tran, 2010, p. 417]. In addition to these measures, in 1835 Minh Mang issued the Ten Commandments, aimed at educating people according to Confucian standards and safeguarding traditional customs and practices against the spread of false religions. Even in Minh Mang’s most severe banning edict issued that year, the ritual issue was still mentioned. “Clear regulations are set for the prohibition of Western Christianity. The envoy Phan Ba Dat said, “Western Christianity is very seductive and is the most extreme religion among all the false religions (...) The regions where Western religious leaders are present are all influenced by false religions to deceive the people and have a relationship with corruption (...) Our country’s laws state that ‘those who practice false religions, heresy, incitement, and deception of the people, and those who lead them shall be imprisoned’. Therefore, Western Christianity is a religion that the King’s Command cannot tolerate and must be completely eliminated. Now, we follow the rituals and laws to establish clear prohibitions, so that people can understand the warnings and suppress false religions, help promote the right religion, and encourage people to follow good customs” [*National Historical Bureau of Nguyen Dynasty*, 1966, p. 243–244]. After the Le Van Khoi incident, Minh Mang issued strict edicts against Catholicism, including one that ordered to execute foreign missionaries spreading this faith in the country. This marked a

¹² In the 19th century, it was challenging to find a middle ground between the Catholics and the Nguyen Dynasty regarding the ritual issue. Minh Mang, who had many concubines and numerous children, found it challenging to accept the Catholic belief in monogamy. On the other hand, in 1841 the Catholic Church passed a resolution at Go Thi’s Religious Synod, prohibiting Catholics from burning incense at ancestral altars during wedding ceremonies and choosing “auspicious days” for their weddings, practices that were considered superstitious by the Vietnamese people [Josef, 1984, p. 147].

significant change, being the first such order. Minh Mang also combined warnings and education to ensure the ban on Christianity was effectively enforced among native believers.

Minh Mang's religious prohibition orders often mention the conflict between Confucianism and Catholicism, either directly or indirectly [*National Historical Bureau of Nguyen Dynasty*, 1966, p. 125–126]. According to Tran Trong Kim, the prohibition of religion by Minh Mang was a mistake but hard to avoid: "It must be understood that our country, from ancient times to the present day, has followed Confucianism in everything, accepting the Three Bonds and Five Relationships as the basis for living (...) So, the son must follow the father, the servant must follow the king, whoever goes against that religion commits a serious crime and deserves to be punished, even if killing a believer is not virtuous, but we have to understand the mindset of the Vietnamese people at that time, who did not clearly understand how Christianity was introduced, so even if he is not the Holy Ancestor anymore, other kings cannot avoid the sin of killing believers" [Tran, 2010, p. 418]. The conflict between the Nguyen dynasty and Catholicism over the ritual issues was the primary cause for the religious ban. Although political factors like the French invasion threat gained importance, the ban's cultural and political foundations stayed unaltered.

RITUAL ISSUES CAUSED BY THE PROHIBITIVE EDICTS OF THIEU TRI AND TU DUC

Although the threat of a French invasion was imminent, Thieu Tri and Tu Duc, who adhered to traditional views, included the issue of rituals in their prohibition orders. They viewed the spread of Catholicism as a danger to Vietnamese customs and traditions, rather than a chance for cultural interchange.

Following Minh Mang's reign, Thieu Tri became the emperor in 1841, and his policy towards Catholicism was comparatively tolerant. In the first six years of his reign, Catholicism was facing a relatively calm environment. Thieu Tri was quite lenient towards Western missionaries, as he held the following belief: "Given that they are outsiders who may not be familiar with our religious practices and the prohibition orders, and taking into account the respect and sincerity shown by their country's representative in seeking permission, we should be grateful and forgive them as a gesture of compassion and goodwill towards these visitors from a distant land to our court" [*National Historical Bureau of Nguyen Dynasty*, 1971, p. 288].

Nonetheless, Thieu Tri continued to view Catholicism as a peril to Vietnamese cultural identity and national sovereignty. He considered Catholicism and opium, both introduced by Westerners, as equally disastrous. After the 1847 incident in Da Nang¹³, Thieu Tri became hostile and convened the Secret Council. Regarding the spread of Christianity, he said, "The Westerners are inherently cunning. If we lift the ban on their religion, then the Anglicans will also request to lift the ban on opium. But the enemy is like a cunning fox that can never be satisfied (...) Besides, the religion of Christianity is a heresy that brings harm through external affairs and opens the way for war. Opium is a drug that harms family and society and endangers people's lives. These two things are strictly prohibited in this country" [*National Historical Bureau of Nguyen Dynasty*, 1968, p. 276–277].

Other prohibition orders by Thieu Tri also highlight the danger that the spread of Catholicism poses to traditional cultural values, which, in the Nguyen dynasty's perspective, were primarily centered on Confucianism. "Christianity is a heresy from the West. Their religion does not worship

¹³ In the first half of 1847, a French fleet arrived in Da Nang and demanded that the Nguyen dynasty should allow freedom of trade and religion. A French captain, accompanied by priests, entered the government office and threatened the Nguyen navy, using it as a pretext to attack Dai Nam. On March 18, 1847, the French fleet opened fire, sinking five copper-plated ships of the Nguyen navy before withdrawing to the offshore waters [*National Historical Bureau of Nguyen Dynasty*, 2006, p. 983–984].

ancestors or gods, but puts forward the theory of Jesus and the Cross to seduce people, sets forth the theory of Heaven to deceive them. This heresy is very harmful to our culture (...). If there are any Christian leaders still hiding in any district, local officials must constantly monitor them (...) to enforce the law, establish morals and customs, restore traditional beauty, and enjoy peace and prosperity. Isn't that good enough? If there are still any violators of the law, they will be punished without mercy!" [*National Historical Bureau of Nguyen Dynasty*, 1968, p. 276–277].

In another edict issued before the death of Emperor Thieu Tri, the ritual issue was also mentioned: "Catholicism is a heresy that deeply deceives people, not only seducing the common people but also causing some officials to become addicted and intoxicated! Tran Quang Giao, an official in Son Tay province, secretly followed the heresy, not caring for the mourning of his mother. There are many people like him, and we cannot let this continue to grow" [*National Historical Bureau of Nguyen Dynasty*, 1968, p. 276].

Since the French navy had attacked the court's ships in Da Nang in 1847, the court's response to Catholic missions has become increasingly tough. This is evident in the first two edicts issued in August 1848 and March 1851. The edict banning Catholicism in 1851 was considered no less severe than the edict of 1835 under Minh Mang's reign, which resulted in the deaths of many native priests. Moreover, the 1851 edict was issued at the time of the Hong Bao incident¹⁴, and Tu Duc harshly prosecuted Western priests, native priests, catechists, and native officials who did not strictly enforce the decree: "Western priests must be beheaded; catechists and students of Western and native priests must be strangled. Those who harbor them must also be punished similarly. Similar punishments also apply to village headmen who harbor them. All officials in the area where the priests are captured will be dismissed" [Nguyen, 2004, p. 42–43].

During the reign of Tu Duc, the ritual issue was mentioned in a ban on Christianity issued on March 30, 1851, after the king met with officials in the court. "The religion of Jesus from the West does not worship ancestors and spirits, causing people to be infatuated with the theories of heaven, hell and holy water. Those who preach, although they know that our laws do not tolerate such false doctrines, are still telling about the sufferings of Jesus, their Lord, seducing ignorant people who are ready to die without remorse (...) The foundation of our civilization is to maintain customs and traditions. These pure customs are being threatened by the spread of this false and bestial doctrine (...)" [Tuck, 1987, p. 34–35].

Another significant work during the reign of Tu Duc was the *Đạo biện* (Disquisition on Religion) in the *Ngự Chế Văn Tập*. Based on his analysis of religion, Tu Duc criticized the Catholic doctrine: "They say that God is the Lord of Heaven, the creator of Heaven and earth and all things. However, they also say that God is not Heaven, not earth, not human, not an object, not a devil, not a spirit, and is the origin of all things without beginning... Compared to Lao Tzu's saying, 'The nameless is the beginning of Heaven and earth. The Way produces one, and one produces two', one can see that the doctrine of Christianity is even more distorted. They only borrow the concept of God to cover up the mark of Christianity and to make it appear more elegant, without any consideration for its origins" [Tu Duc, 1860, p. 44]. In another passage, Tu Duc pointed out: "They want people to worship only God and not their ancestors, parents, or saints. They claim that God is the origin of all human, material, and divine beings, so only God should be worshipped. This is a huge mistake" [Tu Duc, 1860, p. 46].

¹⁴ Hong Bao (1825–1854), the eldest son of Thieu Tri, was bypassed the throne in favour of his half-brother Hong Nham (later known as Tu Duc). King Thieu Tri's recorded reason for this decision was Hong Bao's lack of intellect and education, his hedonistic inclinations, and his unsuitability to uphold the family legacy [*National Historical Bureau of Nguyen Dynasty*, 2002, p. 351]. Hong Bao, who had not accepted the transfer of the throne to Tu Duc, attempted to rally the support of the Catholic community by offering them both freedom and his influence to convert his kingdom into a Christian nation. Despite two failed attempts to reclaim the throne in 1851 and 1854, the eldest prince was eventually imprisoned by Tu Duc and ultimately met a tragic demise while in custody [Pham, 1962, p. 16; Nguyen, Nguyen, 1992, p. 594].

The Nguyen dynasty kings tended to evaluate Christianity through a Confucian lens. Despite their curiosity about Catholicism, including Tu Duc's interest, their comprehension of the religion remained basic and even flawed. The matter of religious ritual continued to surface, either directly or indirectly, even in the final edicts that banned Christianity under Tu Duc's reign, when Cochinchina became a contested territory. Heresy was always a problematic issue at the negotiations between the Hue court and the Franco-Spanish coalition.

Between January and March of 1860, the Tu Duc dynasty issued three successive decrees against Christianity. However, the edict of June 1861 was the most impactful, marking much stricter surveillance and enforcement, which lasted briefly until the 1862 Treaty. This edict inflicted significant harm on the Catholic community, prohibiting gatherings, community activities, and undermining the core structure of the Catholic Church. Catholics were separated from their families, new converts abandoned faith, leading to disintegration of Catholic villages. An estimated 50,000 Christians died or renounced their faith due to this edict's impact [Phan, 1958, p. 320].

The period from 1862 to 1874 was a time of trade and compromise for the court, so the Catholic Church was allowed to preach freely. Article 2 of the 1862 Treaty stipulated that "citizens of France and Spain can practice Catholicism in Vietnam, and citizens of this country, regardless of their religion, can follow the Christian faith without obstruction, but no one should be forced to become a Catholic if they do not want to" [*National Historical Bureau of Nguyen Dynasty*, 1974, p. 298–304].

Hence, the prohibition of Catholicism by the Nguyen dynasty cannot be attributed solely to political motivations, such as the interference of missionaries in Vietnam's internal affairs. It was also influenced by the cultural, ritual, and social differences between Catholicism and Confucianism. Confucianism, as a doctrine, can tolerate coexistence with other religions like Buddhism or Taoism, but it does not permit being subordinate to another religion. On the other hand, Catholicism advocated non-integration with the traditional culture and religion of the Vietnamese people, further complicating the matter.

The conflict between Confucianism and Catholicism extended beyond differences in beliefs and practices. This issue was, in its core, related to legitimacy and authority of the ruling dynasty, based on Confucian ethics and political views. The spread of Christianity threatened this foundation, advocating for the worship of God and Jesus Christ instead of the earthly emperor. This new faith did not recognize the emperor as a divine spirit, as in Confucianism, and shifted the focus from the secular world to the afterlife, which was inconsistent with the mindset of officials in China and Vietnam. The political implications of this conflict were highly important, as the dynasty's legitimacy would be jeopardized if the country were to become Christian [Dahm, 1987, p. 13].

In summary, the issue of rituals arose with the arrival of Catholicism in Vietnam, and it was one of the causes of religious conflicts under the Trinh-Nguyen and Tay Son dynasties in the 17th–18th centuries. In the 19th century, the Nguyen dynasty considered Confucianism the national religion and built a monarchy based on the Chinese model, which further highlighted the significance of rituals, including political aspects. Disagreements between the legitimate and illegitimate religions was closely related to the issue of legitimization of the king and the entire dynasty based on Confucian standards. These cultural, political and religious factors may have urged Gia Long and his successors to ban Catholicism.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the Vietnamese society has a reputation for being tolerant of diverse religious beliefs. It is plausible to suggest that the cultural gap between the traditional Vietnamese values and Western values could have been reconciled, had the Catholics made an effort to incorporate local customs, free from the influence of French colonialism. Similarly, if

the Nguyen dynasty had adopted a more receptive attitude towards the spread of Catholicism and regarded it as a means of promoting cultural exchange, Vietnamese cultural landscape could have undergone enrichment.

In the context of globalization, preserving national cultural identity is a challenging task. The Nguyen dynasty's policy of prohibiting religion, viewed through cultural and religious lenses, provides Vietnam with a historical lesson to learn from.

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