

Book Reviews

Catholicism in Vietnam in the Nguyễn Dynasty (1802-1883)

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Tôn giáo Publishing house, Hanoi 2007, 399 pages.

Catholicism in Vietnam in the Nguyễn Dynasty (1802-1883) is composed by revision and correction of the MA thesis by Nguyễn Quang Hưng at the Faculty of Philosophy, Passau University, Germany.

The main content of the book are: part 1: Vietnamese Catholicism in 17th-18th centuries and Part 2, Vietnamese Catholicism in Nguyễn dynasty (1802-1883).

In the *Introduction*, the author argues that the relationship between Catholicism and Nation in Vietnam has specific characteristics which are unlike other Southeast Asian countries. While most of Southeast Asia countries have witnessed problems among religions, there has been no religious conflicts in Vietnam. Religious war has never been seen in this country.

However, there are problems in the relationship between the State and the Church in Vietnam. In history, no other Southeast Asian countries have ever witnessed the complicated relation between the Catholic church and the indigenous government, and the difficulty in combining the respect to Jesus and the love for the country as in Vietnam. History of Catholic missions in last centuries in Vietnam shows those problems. Since Catholicism was introduced into Vietnam, the Catholics were alienated by their compatriots because they were not allowed by the Church to worship ancestors. Catholic missionaries were considered illegal. Tents of edicts which prohibited Catholic missions or hunted and suppressed Catholicism were issued. Thousands of Catholics were massacred and detained. This is not easy to understand in the country which has the tradition of cultural and religious tolerance as Vietnam.

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In reality, there is a paradox in history of Catholicism in Vietnam. On one hand, despite of serious suppression in many decades in the Nguyễn dynasty, Catholicism rooted and spread out in a country with specific customs and cultural identities. On the other hand, Vietnamese Catholics, despite of many centuries of carrying out mission, still had a certain gap with the indigenous society.

From this approach, the author believes that the deeper analysis on history of Vietnamese Catholicism, especially in Nguyễn dynasty from Gia Long to Tự Đức, will help enlighten those above issues.

In Part 1, with three first chapters, the author analyses the process of Catholic missions from beginning to late 18th century. In Part 2, the core content of the book, with next 7 chapters, by discussing on the issue of ritual in the times of Trịnh – Nguyễn, Tây Sơn and Nguyễn dynasty, the author focuses his analysis on: the political – cultural aspect in the relationship between the Nguyễn dynasty with Catholicism; contents of edicts against the religion; reasons and consequences of Nguyễn kings' policies toward Catholicism; the attitude of king Gia Long with Pigneau de Beháine and with Catholicism; the hard policy by Minh Mạng which basically made a break with Catholicism; the motivation of the colonial regime with missionary works in Vietnam, etc.

The author puts that the propagation of Catholicism into Vietnam had changed the traditional relationship between religion and the state in general, between the State and Catholicism in particular. Thus, to make clear the relationship between Nguyễn dynasty with Catholicism, these three perspectives are discussed: Firstly, in the politico-social perspective, the relation between Catholic mission and colonialism and the evasion of the French was the main reason of the policy which prohibit the religion. Secondly, in the perspective of political and social culture, the problem of “ritual”, also known as the disagreement between Confucianism and Catholicism, then took a political aspect. Thirdly, not like traditional religions in Vietnam, Catholicism had its own powerful organization which was independent from the authority. This turned the State – Church relation into the relation between authority and church organization which had never been witnessed in Vietnam.

Considering all those three perspectives, the author affirms that the Nguyễn dynasty's policy of prohibiting Catholicism was an unavoidable mistake.

Along with material sources by previous researchers, the author also uses rare materials in foreign languages (French and German). With a spirit of honesty and respect for history, the author hopes that the book will contribute more for the

objective and scientific understandings of history of Vietnamese Catholicism in the Nguyễn dynasty.

In the author's opinion, as the relationship between Vatican and the State of Vietnam has been significantly improved since 1990, historical lessons from the Nguyễn dynasty are still valuable for Vietnamese authorities at all levels and also for the Vietnamese Catholic Church in the desire to thoroughly resolve problems which belong to the history. Thus, the author suggests that it is essential for the two sides to build a good relationship in the long-run; all for the national aim of a rich people, strong nation, and an equitable, democratic and civilized society.

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