

Relationship between Confucianism and Catholicism in Vietnam

PHẠM HUY THÔNG*

ABSTRACT: The author believes that research on the relationship between Confucianism and Catholicism in Vietnam can help answer the question why under the great influence of Confucianism in Asia in general, Southeast Asia in particular, Catholicism still strongly develops in Vietnam.

If we consider the birth of the founders of Confucianism and Catholicism, Confucianism had existed 5 centuries before Catholicism. And if we counted the time when these religions were present in Vietnam, Confucianism had come 14 centuries before Catholicism. In the relationships between these two religions, many persons only know that they are alternative religions in opposition to each other, but do not know that these religions have also intimate, close relationships to each other. Here below, I shall present the relationships between these both religions in our country.

Confucianism founded by Confucius (551- 478 BC) had entered Vietnam since the time of the Chinese governors Nhâm Điền and Tích Quang, about 225 AD. The most evident fact was the appearance of Sĩ Nhiếp, who had opened a school at Luy Lâu (Thuận Thành district, Bắc Ninh province) to propagate Confucianism. Catholicism was created by Jesus in the first years of the first century. History had recorded that in 1533, there were foreign missionaries preaching this religion at Ninh Cường, Trà Lũ districts (in present day Nam Định province).

Yet before entering Vietnam, there had existed tension and collision between these two religions in China. By then, there existed in China missionaries of Jesuit, Franciscan and Dominican sects preaching Catholicism. Being more liberal, in desire to have many Catholics, Jesuit missionaries did not force the Catholics to give up the

*. Faculty of Philosophy, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi National University.

cult of ancestors, the respect towards Confucius. The king and officials of the Peking court also regarded with reverence Jesuit missionaries because they were familiar with many scientific branches and were called to the court to assist the emperor. On the contrary, Dominican and Franciscan missionaries, more conservative, strongly opposed the actions of the Jesuit missionaries on the ground that the cult of ancestors of the Confucius is a religious act contrary to Catholicism. They said to Rome that Pope Innocent X, the defender of Rome had signed the edict on 12 September 1645 forbidding Catholics to perform rites on the cult of Confucius and ancestors because this activities was opposite to Catholic dogmas. Who did not follow this edict should have to pay a fine. The Jesuit sent a delegation to Rome to interpret that the rites on the cult of ancestors, and on the veneration of Confucius were completely free from any religious meaning, they only expressed the veneration their descendents towards their ancestors and famous personalities. The new Pope Alexandro VII had paid attention to the proposal of the Jesuits and had signed the edict contradicting the edict on 12 September 1645, but with the condition that "reality should be presented exactly".

Thus the debates on "Chinese rites" stretching more than a century, through 10 popes had taken place. On 8 April 1705 the special envoy of the Holy See, bishop (then archbishop) M de Tournon came to China. He ordered to pull down the placard bearing the characters "Kính thiên" (Respect to Heaven) written by K'ang Hsi emperor on the Peking church and published the Exilladie Edict of the Holy See signed on 21 November 1704, the content of which was to interdict the use of the word "thiên" (heaven) or "Thượng Đế" (God) to designate Thiên Chúa (The Christian God), to interdict the hanging of the banner with the words "Kính thiên" in churches, as well as the cult of Confucius, of ancestors, the placement of ancestral tablets in private houses. K'ang Hsi immediately ordered to expel the clergymen, to destroy the churches and forbid the people to follow Catholicism. According to the data of the Church, in China at that time there were 900 thousand Catholics, but after the *Exiilladie* edict 90 percent had to give up the religion¹. To save the situation, the Peking Bishop A Mezzabarba issued a communiqué on 4 November 1721, to enlarge 8 points, allowing the cult of Confucius and the cult of ancestors with prostration, banquets, flowers before the corpse of the death, etc. but the communiqué was rejected by the Pope Clemente. At the time of the Pope Benedict XIV, another edict refuted the Chinese rites as in complete opposition to Catholic dogmas. Many

researchers of the Catholic Church thought that a chance existed in this misfortune. The interdiction of Catholicism in China and Japan had forced many missionaries to go to Vietnam to predicate. This time, however, it was the expansion period of colonialism. The slogan "Spice, pepper and soul" expressed the link between the colonial system and Catholicism.

Because of the difference, opposition on cultural belief, Catholicism met an opposition in Vietnam. In an imperial edict in 1804, King Gia Long wrote: "As for Catholicism that is newly introduced into our country, it invents the theory on the paradise, the hell. Ignorant men and women follow it, and it becomes an unconscious habit"². And the scholar movement, and especially the uprising in 1874 led by Trần Tân, Đặng Như Mai, Trần Quang Cán put forth the slogan *Wipe out the French, exterminate the heretics* with the following appeal:

"Alas, the false doctrine of Jesus has penetrated into our country. In their prayers, the Catholics only believe in God and the Holy Spirits.

Their dogma says that on this earth there do not exist the king and parents.

Their arguments are both illogical and inadmissible.

Their attitude is full of arrogance. They seize the fertile land to build churches for the false doctrine

*On moral viewpoint, they are trying to corrupt our country and to transform our country into a Catholic one. They insult the Confucian doctrine."*³

A Confucian and a great poet of Vietnam in XIX century had expressed the firm attitude of Confucianism toward Catholicism: "It is better to preserve the home doctrine though blind rather than to have eyes and refuse to serve the parents and ancestors".

By this time, the clergymen who came to our country to propagate the doctrine also could no go farther than the position of Catholic Church of the time. They also condemned Confucianism as a heresy. Alexander de Rhodes whose Vietnamese name was Đắc Lộ (1593 -1660) was a progressive man among the foreign missionaries at that time. He had greatly contributed to the creation of *Quốc ngữ*, a

transcription of the Vietnamese language on the base of Latin letters. He wrote: A very common fact is the respect of Chinese characters. There do not exist any person, despite the social position, who does not send children to study these characters since their childhood. Therefore, any person in this country acquires a smattering of Chinese characters, and nobody is completely illiterate⁴. Another clergyman F. Buzomi, an Italian who came to South Vietnam very early on 18 January 1615 had also good appreciations on this country. He wrote: "Owing to Confucianism, the Vietnamese society and family has had a very high organization, the Vietnamese has admirable qualities and customs that are a great help to the propagation of Catholicism." F. Buzomi added: "The Vietnamese are not fond of literature, their temperament is not so crafty as the Chinese. They are not too inclined towards armament and are not cruel as the Japanese. Though they are easily persuaded and have many superstitions, they early recognize the right and are not so haughty or self-assured as the Chinese."⁵

Some have put forth very progressive questions: "I know why this very beautiful country has not been known, why European geographers do not know the name and almost do not record this country in any map, though they fully record the names of all countries in the world."⁶

Though some Catholic missionaries had progressive ideas on Confucianism in Vietnam, they followed the standpoint of the Church at the time, and therefore considered Confucianism as well as other religions in Vietnam at that time like Buddhism, Taoism as heresies. In the earliest book written in *Quốc ngữ*, *Teaching Catholicism in 8 days* published in Rome in 1651, A. Rhodes wrote: "But their doctrines can be divided into three tendencies... The first tendency is the doctrine of scholars, called Confucianism. The second tendency is the tendency to worship devils called Taoism. The third tendency is the tendency to worship Buddha, called Buddhism. This doctrine came from India⁷." Missionaries thought that Confucius is a highly-respected philosopher, but this respect was like the respect to a teacher, one might take off one's hat, bow the head to greet him but one should not prostrate oneself before him, because Confucius is not a saint. According to the logic of the missionaries, a saint should know that God created the earth, the heaven and anything. A. Rhodes wrote: "Northern Vietnamese call him a saint, but it is absurd

and illogical, as we have persuaded them on this matter. In my opinion, a person who is called a saint should know that the earth and heaven were created by God."⁸

A common letter of Bishop P. M. Gendreau (his Vietnamese name was Đông) written in *Nôm* script in XVIII century had expressly written: Objects that cannot be worshipped are devils, creators of other religions like Confucius, Buddha and ancestors. Visits to temples, pagodas, village communal houses that worship spirits are forbidden. One is not allowed to arrange banquets in the faith that the dead will come back to enjoy the feast. One should not believe in the tombs, in the position of the house, in fortunetelling, trance, etc. Among the Catholics book called "Commission of the four Doctrines" was handed down. It was written in *Sino-Nôm* then translated into *Quốc ngữ* and republished up to 15 times at Tân Định printing house in the period 1887 -1915, and 12 times at Thái Bình in 1953. The content was on the debate between the representatives of the four religions at that time, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and Catholicism on the origin of the human being, the goal of his life and the aim of his death. The representative of Confucianism bases on the first principle which holds that everything comes from the union and separation of Yin and Yang, when living person has to perfect himself to follow the five cardinal virtues: benevolence, righteousness, propriety, knowledge and sincerity. He has to follow the five moral obligation (obligations between the ruler–subject, parent-child, husband-wife, elder brother-younger brother and friendship). If life is the union of Yin and Yang, then death is the separation of these two elements. It is the end without any goal. The representatives of Catholicism were two Catholics priests. They presented the problem according to the Catholic dogma: everything on the earth, including also the human being had been created by God. A Catholic must follow the ten Commandments, the Seven rules and the Four Final objects (Death, Judgments, Paradise and Hell). Then the representatives of Catholicism presented their argument in the form of syllogisms to refute the dogmas of other religions, including Confucianism on these problems. For example, though Confucianism said death was the end of everything why there still existed the sentence "The soul returns to heaven". If Confucianism held that happiness comes from self-practice why was there the sentence?" The happy fate is in heaven?", etc. At last, the only Catholic dogma is convincing and reliable. No doubt, at present, many researchers on Catholicism still suspect of the truthfulness of this work, and hold that it was a book of fictional character, with many errors to explain the doctrine, especially from the

spirit of the Second Vatican II Council. But it nevertheless expressed the relationship between Confucianism and Catholicism of that time.⁹

Thus we can see the disapproval attitude of Catholicism towards Confucianism especially in the first stage of its coming to Vietnam. No doubt, Confucianism could not be friendly to Catholicism. But between Confucianism and Catholicism in Vietnam apart from difference there existed also intimate relationships.

Before all else, there were positive remarks of Catholic priests on Confucianism that we have quoted above. Then, if we examine more closely, even the name of Catholicism as *Thiên Chúa giáo* had relationship with Confucianism. In China, when translating the Latin word Deus meaning God, the creator of the universe, people not finding any suitable word transcribed it into *Teou-se* (a meaningless word, similar to the use of the word *Chúa Dêu* sometimes used in Vietnam). The three other words of relatively close meaning are *Thiên chủ*, *Thượng Đế* and *Thiên*, but the second word *Thượng Đế* had been used by Confucians to mean heaven and the word *Thiên* has only the meaning of the blue sky, therefore missionaries used the word *Thiên chủ* (literally meaning the master of heaven). This word was introduced the Vietnam. At the Vatican library, there still exist a letter written in 1630 sent by Catholics to the Holy See with this sentence “Tu thiên chu giang sinh chi kim, nhất thiên lục bát tam thập niên” (A thousand eight hundred and thirty years have elapsed since the birth of the master of heaven up to now)¹⁰. In 1584, when the clergyman Ruggiori wrote the book “*Thiên Chúa thực lục*” (The True Meaning of the Master of Heaven) the term “*Thiên Chúa*” was officially recognized. Some scholars explained that the word “*chủ*” (master) only means the chief, the governor, but the word *Chúa* had in addition the meaning of an object of cult. For example “*ngày chủ nhật*” (Sunday) means the first day of a week, while “*ngày chúa nhật*” means the day of God, for the cult of God.

At present, people have found a fairly great number of documents in books, letters of Catholic clergymen from the West who were familiar with the philosophy of Confucius. This matter was interested. An example, Bishop Hermosile in 1858 sent a common letter to the Christians in the area of the East in Northern Vietnam. The content of this letter was as follows: “The rule on one husband and one wife in the three invariable relationships popularly called the three social bonds, the bond of the king to his subjects, of the husband to his wife, of the father to his children is

capital. If these relationships were loose then the country would be in disorder and unhappiness, together with other sins come". Then by basing on the Confucianist principles of "self-improvement, household management, country government and pacification of the empire", the letter continued: "From this principle, we know how important is the relationship between the husband and his wife. A king who wants to govern his country should first of all think of a good organization in his family, and the relationship between husband and wife should be well observed. Then the family will be in peace, the children will learn their parents' virtue. If filial piety was observed in the family, then concord and harmony would be preserved in external relationships and it would be a great common interest."¹¹ Many Catholic sacred books also made use of Chinese characters like "Prayers to Madonna", familiarly called "Phuc di chi tôn" which was a very famous work and had been extolled by Confucianist scholars. An interesting fact was the formation of *Quốc ngữ* writing. Many Catholic clergymen over many generations had perfected it with the collaboration of a number of Vietnamese. This transcription of the Vietnamese language on the base of Latin script had been approved by many patriotic scholars at the end of XIX century and in the beginning of XX century. And Catholic churches are places to preserve writings in Chinese and in *Nôm*, and they did not destroy and abolish these traditional writings as many people would have thought of. Even when the Resident Superior of Tonkin in 1910 issued the edict forcing all applications to be written in *Quốc ngữ*, Bishop Pierre Munaggi (his Vietnamese name was Trung) at Bùi Chu still sent a letter on 7 October 1910 listing the works that the seminaries must study. This list included the works like: *Five thousand Chinese characters*, *Three thousand Chinese characters*, *A thousand Chinese characters*, *Short History of Vietnam*, etc. with this added words: "These are books the seminaries must learn. When they have learnt all these books, they may learn other books as they wish. At the examination, the subjects of poems, rhythmic proses dissertations are taken from the books that have been mentioned. And they have to write a letter"¹².

Bishop P. M Gendreau (his Vietnamese name was Đông) ordered the publication of about 40 works in *Sino-Nôm* and ordered the parish to find Confucian scholars to teach the students an hour of Chinese characters every week. The Catholic churches have left a huge *Sino-Nôm* treasure with all themes like novels, correspondences, dictionaries, parallel scrolls and songs. The priest Majorica had compiled up to 42 works "Stories of Saints" with about 1,200,000 words written during the period

1632-1656 which are kept at the Bibliotheque Nationale de Paris. The Institute of Religious Studies had organized a scientific symposium on *Sino-Nôm documents on Catholicism* at the end of May 2003 and had affirmed this fact.

Another aspect was the existence of many Catholics, including priest, bishops coming from Confucianism. One can mention well-known persons like Nguyễn Trường Tộ (1830–1871). Though living in a very complex situation, under the strict prohibition of Nguyễn dynasty toward Catholicism, he sent to the court 58 confidential petitions in the hope of renovating the country. Many problems he spoke of are still actual up to the present time like the struggle against corruption, smuggling. In this time, there were reformers like the priest Đặng Đức Tuấn (1806-1874) who sent to the court the text “A plan for extolling the doctrine and pacifying the French” then “A project for pacifying the French”. The scholar Đinh Văn Điền in Ninh Bình province presented “The Project for Land Exploitation, opening gold mines, building ships, organizing the Office to facilitate the circulation of goods.” A question is raised: “Was it because they were Catholics, therefore though being Confucian, they were not bound by the conservative and feudal ideas of the Nguyễn dynasty at that time?”

History also recorded many patriotic examples of priests, Catholics who remained Confucian. The priest Đậu Quang Lĩnh (1867-1919) at Hà Tĩnh was well learned in Chinese so he was charged by the Church to translate the works of Liang Ch'i Shao and K'ang Yu Wei to be consulted. When entering the Reformation Society of Phan Bội Châu, he was arrested and sent into exile at Côn Đảo for 9 years. The jailer asked him that why is he a rebel though being a priest and he had answered by a parable scroll as follow.

“It is because of the white people? Though being on the platform at the execution ground, a citizen has to accept his obligation in all situations.

*We are yellow people! We have to follow the examples of the scholars in exile, in prison, in death.”*¹³

There is a fact that is worthy of attention. A notorious clergyman like Hồ Ngọc Cẩn though being a bishop (1876 -1948) his style, his life still were like the personality of a Confucian. This bishop had offer a gold necklace to the Government of Resistance and was invited by Hồ Chí Minh to be an adviser to the government. He had written

a hundred works among which was the book *A philosopher should know himself* full of Eastern philosophy. We find in this book many familiar sentences.

Inversely, many Confucians had made research on Catholicism and had many exact remarks. The scholar Lê Quý Đôn (1726-1784) when going to China as an ambassador in 1760 had contacted with Catholic clergymen and he had written on them in his book *Words by Vân Đài* with admiration. He wrote: "In the 30th year of Vạn Lịch (1602), under the reign of Thần Tông of Ming dynasty, a person called Matheo Racci together with his group have come from Kuang Tung to Min and then to Kin Ling. They called themselves Europeans and have come to this place after crossing the sea, in a journey of many thousand miles. They showed their telescope, their alarm clock, etc. explaining on the way to look at the stars, the sunshade. They spoke very distinctly on the calendar and were called by the great officials in the provinces as Western scholars, saints of the West. Therefore, they were sent to Peking to meet the king."¹⁴ He fairly precisely spoke of the Catholic dogmas "The great Western Sea country is on the West of China, at a distance of sixty thousand miles. Its name is Âu Hải Quốc (the country of the European Sea)... people there adore God, nobody knows of the existence of Confucianism, Buddhism or Taoism. God is the first sovereign, the creator of everything. They build temples for the common worship."¹⁵

A notorious patriotic scholar in the modern times, Phan Bội Châu (1867- 1940) had also very progressive ideas on Catholicism compared with the scholars of that time especially with the group in the scholar movement. He wrote: "Catholic compatriots are our brothers... the severe punishments of the French during these many decades have not any reduction to the Catholics. The money to pay taxes and duties has not been reduced toward the Catholics."¹⁶ That was why he called for the unity between non-Catholics and Catholics. Many Catholics have joined his Reformation Society such as Mai Lão Bạng, Lê Khanh, the priests Nguyễn Tường, Đậu Quang Lĩnh, Nguyễn Thần Đồng, etc. He also affirmed that "Only the Catholics who do not aid the French to cause difficulties to Vietnam are people of the Savior, are compatriots of the Vietnam country."¹⁷ Dương Quảng Hàm has also remarked: "European missionaries have invented *Quốc ngữ*, their aim was to have a kind of writing to easily our language. The historical conditions have contributed to make of this writing the popular writing for the Vietnamese nation. Though this writing like

any work created by human beings has some shortcomings, but we should accept that on this earth there does not exist any writing so convenient and so easy to learn.”¹⁸

The convenience of *Quốc ngữ* has been proved in practice. To learn and write *Quốc ngữ*, only a few months of study are needed. But to learn at least 1200 Chinese characters one must spend one year of study. Nom script is more difficult. Therefore, in the campaign against illiteracy from 1946 to 1954, 10 million people have wiped up illiteracy. We understand why members of the group of the school founded by Vietnamese Revolutionaries had considered the use of *Quốc ngữ* as one among the six objects to develop the intellectual standard of the people. This group said “Recently, a Portuguese priest has created *Quốc ngữ* in making use of 20 European letters of the alphabet combined with 6 tones, 11 rhymes spelt in the phonetically manner to write our language in a very simple and quick way. Any people in the country when going to school must make use of *Quốc ngữ* to write old and recent things and to use it in their correspondence. This is really the first step in knowledge.”¹⁹

A person has learned the books of the sages and saints to become a great communist, a great man of culture in the world, president Hồ. Hồ Chí Minh had written hundreds of articles on Catholicism. He was clearly aware of the great humanity and has pledged to become "a small student" of the great men including Jesus. He also saw the patriotic tradition of Catholics and was concerned with the needs of the believers to unite them in the revolutionary forces. He wrote: "Buddhists believe in Buddha, the Catholics believe in God; as we believe in Confucius. They were the most venerable persons that we believe in. But towards the people we should not do anything contrary to the people's will. What the people wants we should perform.”²⁰ Hồ Chí Minh's viewpoint on religions is a precious heritage of our Party which is preserved and developed by the Party in the 25th resolution of the Central Committee "On religious works" adopted by the 7th Central Committee Conference at the end of January 2003.

After the August Revolution in 1945, Confucianism was not the ruling ideology, and our State also asserts the equality between religions. On the Catholic side, there also exists a reform especially after the Vatican II Council, the value of other religions is respected and is not condemned as before. At the same time, the Church constantly advocates the dialogue with other religions. This is a progressive

viewpoint, conform to the tendency of the time. The research on the relationship between Confucianism and Catholicism in Vietnam provides us an explanation on the fact why all under the influence of Confucianism (such as China, Korea and Japan), Vietnam people still fairly strongly adhere to Catholicism, and why Vietnam has become one of the countries with the greatest number of Catholic believers in Southeast Asia.

Reference:

-
- ¹. Bùi Đức Sinh. *The History of Catholic Church*, tome 2, Chân Lạp Publishing House, Sài Gòn 1972, p.135.
 - ². *Đại Nam Thực lục chính biên* (Historical Records of Vietnam). Historical Publishing House, Hanoi 1963, p. 168.
 - ³. Quoted from Đỗ Quang Hưng. *The history of Catholicism in Vietnam*, Hanoi University, 1991. p. 56.
 - ⁵. Quoted from Nguyễn Hồng, *History of Catholic predication in Vietnam*, Tome I, Saigon 1994, p. 62.
 - ⁶. A. Rhodes. *The trip to propagate Catholicism*, Đại Kết library, Saigon 1994. p. 62.
 - ⁷. A. Rhodes. *Biblical exegesis in 8 days*. Đại Kết library, 1994. p. 62.
 - ⁸. A. Rhodes. *The History of the North Vietnam*, *Ibid.*, p. 39.
 - ⁹. See Nguyễn Hưng. *A Rough Draft of Sino– Nom Bibliography on Vietnamese Catholicism*, 2000, p. 184.
 - ¹⁰. Quoted from *Religious Studies Review*, No. 6, 2001, p. 30.
 - ¹¹. *Letters chosen from common letters*, Kê Sắt Publishing House, 1903, Tome 2.
 - ¹². Quoted from Nguyễn Hưng, *Ibid.*, p. 123.
 - ¹³. Nguyễn Hưng, *Ibid.*
 - ¹⁴. Quoted from *Religious Studies Review*, No. 6, 2001.
 - ¹⁵. *Ibid.*
 - ¹⁶. Phan Bội Châu. *Vietnamese national history*, Văn Sử Địa Publishing House, Hanoi 1958, p. 80 and 83.
 - ¹⁷. *Ibid.*
 - ¹⁸. *A short history of the Vietnamese Literature*, Saigon 1960, p. 180.
 - ¹⁹. *Anthology of Vietnamese literature 1858- 1930*, Educational Publishing House, 1980, p. 180.
 - ²⁰. Hồ Chí Minh. *Complete work*, Tome IV, Hanoi, 1985, p. 48.