

POLICY TOWARD CATHOLICISM UNDER TỰ ĐỨC REIGN - SOCIAL CONTEXT AND PARADOXES

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Abstract: *Catholic prohibition policies were enforced under the reigns of Gia Long, Minh Mạng and Thiệu Trị; however, the policy banned Catholicism was pushed to a higher level which becoming religion-nation conflict in the reign of Tự Đức. The main reason was that Catholicism linked closely with Western invasion. In this article, the writer states some main reasons causing Catholic prohibition policies in the reign of Tự Đức, including subjective and objective reasons. Then, she inferred paradoxes relating to Catholic issues in Vietnam in the 19th century from her analysis.*

1. Brief outlines of socio-political and religious context under Tự Đức times

King is the second child of king Thiệu Trị and the fourth king of the Nguyen dynasty after Gia Long, Minh Mạng and Thiệu Trị. King Tự Đức (1847-1883) is named Nguyễn Phúc Thì, titled Hồng Nhậm, imperially titled Dục Tông Anh Hoàng Đế.

Under the Tự Đức times, the absolute monarchy's structure had been stabilized and power was in the King's hand. This dynasty inherited many experiences of culture and politics from previous dynasties. However, this dynasty had to cope with difficulties such as declined economy because of policy which gave priority to agriculture while limited trading activities, applied closed-door policy; Confucianism as the base for argument revealed many shortcomings; the biggest problem was that the danger of being invaded by the French colonists. Before these challenges, king Tự Đức and fellows had some solutions to adjust and reform for some fields such as politics, culture, international relations. However, these solutions could only be successfully implemented when they had enough time and favourable conditions in a stable society. These factors; however, were absent under Tự Đức times.

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There were some positive changes in society under Tự Đức times in comparison with previous times but the court and social classes still had no preparation of thoughts, political mechanism, structure at central and local levels to deal with changes in politics and to catch up with contemporary situation. Tự Đức also inherited a tough heritage, i.e. debts, undeniable conflicts between the Nguyễn dynasty and its process servers, religious prohibited royal decrees issued by Minh Mạng, germinating conflicts between Catholicism and nation, impulsive advocacy of the French Catholics to French government to invade Vietnam, etc. All of the above disadvantages had been accumulated and explored right after Tự Đức came to the throne. Thus, any government policies or any social reactions towards inner or outer impacts were passively and temporarily coping solutions, which means there must have been unavoidable mistakes in dealing with religious issues during that time.

During his thirty-six years in the throne, Tự Đức had had to deal with the French military force in Vietnam for thirty years. That was an extremely high pressure for a king and his mandarins. Besides, another complicated issue raised was the conquest of Catholicism whose activities were associated with the imperialism. Tự Đức's policies towards this religion aimed at defending the country as well as stabilizing it. However, this is a paradox uneasy to deal with while the position and power of Tự Đức dynasty had had to cope with resistances of many classes. Some neutral classes like scholars, soldiers, handicraftsmen were easily attracted to socio-politics activities. Nature of the politic activities was not like that of the partisan war against feudalism before, yet it had many complicated characteristics with different thoughts. The movement of thoughts had certainly affected religious policies at that time.

During the Tự Đức's reign, having recognized highly and considered as a base of thought, Confucianism had exposed its rigidities and obsolescence. Buddhism in the community was limited by the government while Buddhist activities in the Huế Citadel and temples built by royal families in provinces were sponsored by the government. Taoism in this time was quite ebullient in the Imperial palaces and in the communities with activities like incantations and charms, sickness treatment, gods and deities' worship, etc. Under the Nguyễn dynasty in general, and Tự Đức's throne, whenever a plague, drought, famine, etc. happened, the royal court organized worship rituals with many customs and honors regulated by Taoism. The royal court also passed a royal decree regarding to recruitment of skillful worship men. The

general policy of the government was to limit Taoism in the community. However, the government still respected and attracted skillful shamans.

During this time, traditional religions like Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, all deeply had conflicts with Catholicism, especially the conflict between Catholicism and Confucianism as Confucianism was the government base. This could be seen through the relationship between the government and the imperialists, between the scholar class and the Catholic. Confucian scholars did not accept Catholicism as the religious teachings were different from the Vietnamese traditional customs and especially the Catholicism had sights associated with losing the country's sovereignty and independence as it related to the Westerner and the imperialism. Catholicism during Tự Đức throne, in spite of the limitation and even butchery of the government, was strongly viable and continuously developed with the division of many bishoprics and increased number of bishops as well as followers.

2. Religious prohibition policy and the grounds of the prohibition.

Under the reign of the Nguyễn dynasty, significant and tiresome religious policies were of Catholic ones. Religious prohibition and caution towards the Westerner was a policy born before Tự Đức reign. The king Gia Long, Minh Mạng, Thiệu Trị all had had policies to ban Catholicism, resulting in the fact that Tự Đức continued to implement them. To Tự Đức's time, the politics conditions had been changed; Catholicism were associated with politics and military so in the period of 1848 (Tự Đức calendar) and 1862, the court had passes many imperial decrees to prohibit the religion, resulting in the breakage in all religious relationships. After signing the Peace Treaty in Nhâm Tuất year of 1862, religious conflicts in many areas continued to thrive as the court could not control the situation. Having passed unthorough and inconsistent policies, causing mistakes in diplomacy, the imperial court was advantaged by the French who escalate politically and militarily. Diplomatic mistake was one of the reasons of religious limitations. Among Confucians, many tended to oppose both the Catholic and the court.

Therefore, at the beginning, the court's attitude towards religious followers was reluctant and suspicious. Before the French fired the country, Tự Đức and his subordinates strictly implemented administration to search and arrest the religious leaders, prohibit the religion, demolish churches, and isolate the Catholic in order to

protect the country's sovereignty. However, after the 1862 Peace Treaty, the court released all religious followers from prisons and even exempted taxes for them and compensated their lands.

To understand the reason of the acts and have full explanation of the inconsistent attitude of the Nguyễn as well as Tự Đức towards Catholicism, it is necessary to understand the bases to which the Nguyễn passed its prohibition policies.

Objectively speaking, the 19th century was the core century for the era changes. Under the Nguyễn dynasty, especially under Tự Đức's reign, Vietnam had to face the era, regional, and international movements. This was the time the imperialism developed very strongly, the needs for new markets and conspiracies to colonize more territories of the imperialist were thriving internationally. "In terms of the relationship between imperialism and evangelization internationally and in Vietnam, it is said not to have had any further discussion. The tight connection between the evangelization in Vietnam and the invasion of the French in our country was historically exposed"¹.

Subjectively speaking, there were some main reasons causing Catholic prohibition policies during the first few years of Tự Đức reign as follows:

Firstly, the prohibition was one of the policies to cope with the risk of sovereignty invasion as well as the influence of a foreign religion (before the French invasion in Vietnam). As when Catholicism had fairly strong developed in Vietnam, the prohibition was to protect national defense of the colonial risks. Apart from the responsibility to protect the national defense, Tự Đức reign also had to deal with cultural influences and imposition as well as to limit heresy. Having dealt with the two pressures, the king had to protect national culture and customs, as well as to protect sovereignty.

Secondly, when Catholicism penetrated in Vietnam, it broke the dominated position of Confucianism on which the government depended and it disordered the people's thinking by prohibiting to worship ancestors. Only God's worship in Catholicism is against the thinking of Asian people.

¹. Đỗ Quang Hùng. *Some Issues of the Catholic History in Vietnam*, The National University Publishing House, Hanoi, 1991, p. 271.

Thirdly, due to the limit of knowledge and other countries, the Nguyễn kings did not fully understand Catholicism, resulting in the unsuitability of politic policies to the religion. The Court still had prejudice and misunderstanding of Catholicism. The implementation of policies towards Catholicism had had many mistakes and inconsistency between the government's policies and the implementers.

Fourthly, Catholicism had become counterbalance with the government in terms of politics, thought, and culture. In reality, the reactionaries in Catholic community had influenced part of the religious followers, including some high ranking individuals to participate in the French's army and politic activities.

During the French invasion, the king was reluctant and did not want to prohibit the religion; however, due to the politics pressure at that time, the king had to pass many severe laws on prohibiting the religion and killing the people who followed it. In the condition of a tense politics, Catholicism with its manifestation to attach to imperialism caused social instability, resulting in the fact that the court did not have enough time to understand it as a religion, so the court had passed many tough decrees. According to the scholar Trần Văn Giàu's judgment, the policies are "to push the Catholic to either voluntarily surrender and suffer death with no opportunities to claim their innocence or to follow the invaders to fight against their own country", and "the policies shows that the Huế Court was in a disadvantageous position, but the advantageous one and was worried but confident, was losing the battle but winning it"².

Policies without advance planning passively implemented did not solve the conflict of the relationship between the government and Catholicism. In Vietnam, Catholic conflicted with national issues had resulted in a tense politics issue firstly happened in the history of Vietnam.

Administrative solutions did not annihilate faith and belief of the religious followers. The king Tự Đức had already recognized the limitations, but due to the tense politics conditions and the influences of the warlike side and part of the scholars, he could not manage the situation. "This was understandable as the acceptance of Catholicism means the acceptance of failure to a religion whose

², Trần Văn Giàu. *Development of Vietnamese Thinking in the 19th Century to the August Revolution*, Volume 1, *Feudal Ideology and its Loss against its Historical Duties*, the National Politics Publishing House, 2006, pp. 339-340.

teachings were conflicted with national traditions, and to which the risk of invasion from the French was coming”³.

The king Tự Đức had made many efforts to save the country by his domestic and international solutions, but he did not success. Yoshiharu Tsuboi concluded in his writing four reasons for the unsuccess of the King Tự Đức as 1. Loss of his people’s trust (mainly because he was infertile and came to power after eliminating his own brother); 2. Economic recession (shortcoming trades and the court could not control the foreign affairs’ network); 3. The burden of maintaining national heritages (the French penetration and influence that had been continuing through many previous reigns and the power controls of senior mandarins as well as the distrust of the scholars); 4. Politics obstacles (the king’s policies were not based on the benefit of the people, in addition to the fact that the scholar class was keep aloop from the king and the court after many politic events. The country’s policies, including religious ones, were implemented without support of the two key classes)⁽⁴⁾.

Along with the losses that the Catholic in Vietnam had suffered, the results of the tough policies were “to distract religious followers from the management of the government and the court and separate themselves as a foreign society from the traditional society”⁵. This has caused a consequence among the Vietnamese Catholic that they tend to live separately in groups and are very solidary, resulting in the distance between them and the nation.

During Tự Đức time, the war started and Catholicism did not maintain its old position as a social ideology but becoming a strategic factor of winning or losing the war. It can be easily seen that the French had made most of advantage of the Catholicism strategic factor. If the king had followed Catholicism, then the country would have become Catholic country (beginning during Gia Long reign). The French had made use of the dissatisfied Catholicism to their purposes (like the case of Lê Văn Phụng). The French also used Catholicism as a mean of national division.

³. Hồ Chí Minh city National Politics Institute, Science Center for Religion and Belief, and Center for Huế Citadel Preservation. Research thesis: *Understanding the Religious Policies of the Nguyễn Dynasty*, Hanoi-Huế, 2001, p. 129.

⁴. Refer more in Yoshiharu Tsuboi. *The Country of Đại Nam in Opposition with France and China (1847-1885)*, the Vietnamese Historical Association, Hanoi, 1993, pp. 332-338.

⁵. Hồ Chí Minh city National Politics Institute, Science Center for Religion and Belief, and Center for Huế Citadel Preservation: *Understanding the Religious Policies...*, ibid, p. 153.

Whenever any conflicts arose, the nature of separation and resistance of the Catholic were unintendedly benefited for the French conspiracies. And in fact, some Catholic authorities had become spied for the French and there were military struggles in sensitive areas.

3. The time's paradoxes

Vietnam in the 19th century was facing invasion and colonized by colonially feudal country. The process of being invaded and colonized was clearly described by many historical writers in many documents. However, how did the Catholic and other classes know about the process? What were the choices of viewpoints and thought they could have chosen? Why were many figures whose merit or crime could difficultly be judged? There were many events that were difficult to consider them right or wrong. What were the reasons for the complications?

There were epoch paradoxes relating to Catholic issues in Vietnam in the 19th century. The paradoxes created two possible solutions, i.e. either to choose one of the two opposite ways, or to be ambivalent. However, it is always complicated that paradoxes have not been solved as following one way would lead to doing wrong in another way. The king Tự Đức, his subordinates, and religious followers had to face the paradoxes, resulting in limitations in foreign affairs' policies in general, and religious policies in particular.

For the king himself, Tự Đức had to face the fact that he had to maintain social stability, religions' harmony, and sovereignty. The Nguyễn dynasty experienced the time full of challenges right after their national unification. And then, the country had to face the risk of the French invasion. The court had chosen solutions to issue imperial decrees to ban Catholicism to protect sovereignty and the nation. However, the reactions were mistaken evangelization with invasion, the Catholic with the colonial (even though in reality, there were implications of the invasion and colonialization). Thus, the feudal authorities in power did not trust the Catholic community, so they did not oversee the enemy's conspiracies; they could not distinguish who the God worship Catholic were, who the reactionaries were. This was one of the key reasons for the mistaken policies towards Catholicism of the Tự Đức reign.

For feudal intellectual, mandarins, and scholars, the paradox of the Peace Treaty in 1862 was that if they had been loyal to the king, to the court, then they had to be concessive to the French and accepted the fact that the French invaded and took control of their land. In contrast, if they had resisted the government's policies, they will make the country weakened and were against their own country and their families. The feudal intellectual were also worried about the appearance and actions of the French commissioners as "All mandarins were afraid of the commissioners' conspiracies and did not know them certainly, so they complaint and only guessed whose conspiracies they were"⁶.

For Catholic followers, following the religion meant that they had to suffer the prohibition of the government (before the 1862 Peace Treaty). From 1862, Catholicism was granted permission to practice, but the religion was still under pressures of other social classes as Catholicism was associated with the invaders. Besides, some commissioners supported for the idea of invading Vietnam and they tried all their best to separate and create conflicts among religious and non-religious followers, to attract religious followers to politics and violent activities, and to stimulate fanaticism of religious followers. Some religious followers' mistaken actions caused misunderstanding among non-religious communities so it made them stranger in their own country. "Any An Nam people, who followed Catholicism, were considered as bad as reactionaries"⁷. The priest Louvet estimated that "The Catholic was not only a heresy, separating themselves from the communities and their families as they had denied to worship their ancestors, but they were also friends of the invaders and were reactionaries, who asked the invaders to invade their own country"⁸.

The time's effects have caused paradoxes on religious policies at that time. Historical limitations, mistaken policies on religion of Tự Đức caused evilly social consequences. Catholic issues among politics issues were turned to the Catholicism-Nation conflict, mainly due to the reason of protecting independence and sovereignty but discrimination towards the religion. Thus, it results in a paradox that *Catholic prohibition was based on religious tolerance*.

⁶. Yoshiharu Tsuboi. *The Country of Đại Nam in Opposition...*, ibid, p. 70.

⁷. Đỗ Quang Hưng. *Some Issues of the Catholic History...*, ibid, p. 58.

⁸. As of Yoshiharu Tsuboi. *The Country of Đại Nam in Opposition...*, ibid, p. 69.

For the Vietnamese, despite difficulties and the tragedy, they had still shown their religious tolerances. Alfred Schreiner and H el ene Tournaire had said “The Vietnamese are very religiously tolerant”⁹. This can be seen through the time’s evidences. The priest Louvet wrote that “Butchering the Catholic was a kind of revenge against the establishment of the protective regime by the French government, rather than the religious discrimination”¹⁰. Having the same opinion, the Admiral Bonard indicated that “For all the reasons, the kings, mandarins, and the Vietnamese expressing their hostile attitude towards Catholicism mainly aim at the rebellious and oppressive attitude of some of the Church’s servants. The hostile is justified by the slow fall of the government control, by our continuing attacks to Vietnam, and by the fact that France is colonizing this country. Evangelization and imperialism go abreast”¹¹.

It can be seen more clearly in Phạm Nhu Cương’s speaking to explain for the paradox that “Prohibiting and butchering fiercely and toughly Catholicism by the King Minh Mạng, Tự Đức in the first half of the 19th century were not our tradition and were not in the line of our ideological and cultural development of our country. [...], one of the mains reasons for the mistaken policy was the conflict between the two cultures, two ways of thinking, and two different lifestyles with all of the differences between Orient and Western; however, the key reason was the defensive reaction in the face of imperialist invasion. The tragedy is that the Nguyễn kings made a mistake of solutions, which enabled the imperialist to better balkanize our people”¹².

One may think the paradoxes would not have happened if the Nguyễn dynasty had used more flexible policies. However, this seems impossible to implement other policies at that time as “religious control and exploitation in Vietnam was so strongly done by the French, the French missionary priests were too enthusiastic to their own country’s benefit so they tried their best to advantage the religion’s followers’ belief, etc., and especially the religious management in Vietnam was full of imperialism”¹³.

⁹. As of Nguyễn Sinh Duy. *A Handbook of the Current Conditions*, The Literature Publishing House, National Culture Research Center, 2004, p. 124.

¹⁰. As of Đỗ Quang Hưng. *Some Issues of the Catholic History*..., *ibid*, p. 86.

¹¹. As of Nguyễn Sinh Duy. *A Handbook of the Current Conditions*..., *ibid*, p. 125.

¹². The Vietnam Social Sciences Committee and The Government Religious Committee. *Martyrdom and History of Vietnam*, Science Conference’s summary record in Ho Chi Minh City, 1988, p. 10.

¹³. Đỗ Quang Hưng. *Some Issues of the Catholic History*..., *ibid*, p. 22.

King Tự Đức was not a tough and cruel king, but the tense politics condition, lack of time to consider Catholicism merely a religion attributed to his passing slaughtering policies towards Catholicism. It has brought many anguish lessons in the history of Vietnam in terms of relationship between the Government and the Church that many descendants have not let it happen again.

4. Some conclusions

The Vietnamese is traditionally religious tolerant, harmonious, but Catholicism in relationship to politics issues during the Tự Đức reign was pushed to a level of religion-nation conflict. The main reason was religion in association with politics at that time rather than the religious stigma and discrimination. Catholic prohibition was started during Tự Đức reign; it had been starting in previous reigns, even was fiercer at some points. However, during Tự Đức throne, Catholicism was associated with Western invasion, so any passed policies against the religions were advantaged and became sensitive politics issues. Religious issues can only be solved in a stable society and in a strong constitution, which lacked in Vietnam in the 19th century.

Along with the issues of policies of the government, the more importance was the implementation in the lower levels. In some places, mandarins created good environment for Catholicism to develop, and in some other places, the government's policies were excessively implemented, especially in those areas where the scholars' *Bình Tây Sát Tả* movement was popular, resulting in badly damaged consequences. The condition had made many Catholics comply with the enemy.

The passive and gradually concessive policies of the Tự Đức throne was reasons of conflict and discord in the inner court, resulting in separation and resistance of the religious followers as well as other social forces. Thus, the Tự Đức force was not only attacked externally, but also suffered separation, discord of different forces, making the country weaker in front of the invasion risk of the French.

In Vietnam history, the integration of Catholicism was not as smooth as other foreign religions because of the subjective and objective condition of the time. The fact that Catholicism in Vietnam created paradoxes on social relationships and had to face reactions from the court and social classes, has brought lessons about the Government and the Church's relationship, mutual efforts of both sides to reach, understand each other and solve the problems. /.

