Missionaries, Priests and Mandarins: Catholicism and the Nguyen in Vietnam's south, 1820-1862

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Unless cited otherwise in the text, this thesis represents the results of my own research.

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Abstract

Preoccupied with the diplomatic activities of French missionaries in mid-nineteenth century Vietnamese politics, few studies have explored the significance of Catholicism at the local level. My study takes a very different approach and seeks to focus attention on local perspectives, by historicizing Catholicism as a socio-religious practice of choice in Vietnamese society, and by relating mission expansion in Vietnam to changes in France. Drawing on the Nguyễn chronicles and other court records translated into modern Vietnamese, as well as a wealth of private correspondence produced by French missionaries based in Vietnam, my study focuses on local experiences and changing political circumstances in the context of anti-Catholic hostilities. Investigating experiences from the court level down to village society, and considering the influence of mission activity, my dissertation traces how and why violence escalated in southern Vietnamese life from the Lê Văn Khôi Rebellion of 1833-1835, through to the wave of anti-Catholic massacres from the mid-1850s to the late 1860s.

From the late 1840s to 1850s, court suspicions fuelled malicious rumours about Catholic practice, demonising whole communities. In turn, the increasing Catholic refusal to participate in village cults sharpened distrust among neighbours. Over time, court violence against Catholics, averted only through bribery or extortion, reduced the capacity for officials to maintain social order. Mission correspondence repeatedly shows how illicit arrangements were negotiated between missionaries and local authorities – from provincial Governors down to canton chiefs – to protect communities from, or insulate against, threat. From the 1840s financial considerations became even more entrenched in social relations. The chance to exploit the compromised status of Catholics tempted more officials and opportunists to resort to extortion. At the same time, in France and Europe, published missionary accounts of persecution in Vietnamese missions inspired unprecedented levels of funding via donations from lay Catholics and charitable organisations. Together, the growth of local corruption fed by foreign finances magnified the effects of local tensions in Vietnamese society.

My dissertation challenges the simplistic view that mission Catholicism was an institution imposed externally on Vietnamese society. A close investigation of Nguyễn court edicts exhorting Catholics to recant, memorials criticizing Catholic practice and the social commentary and observations of missionaries reveals the extent to which Catholicism was anchored in local religious culture by the nineteenth-century. From the 1830s, for the first time, the Missions-Étrangères fully controlled the Cochinchina mission. All missionaries in Cochinchina belonged to a disciplined organisation united in its desire to strengthen Catholic universalism at the same time that a new and powerful court was determined to eradicate the dangerous, foreign superstition once and for all. Such a critical conjunction of circumstances had never existed in southern Vietnam before. As my study shows, to understand changes at the local level, Vietnamese Catholicism must be historicized, the local dimensions of change unravelled, and the little known role of lay Catholic patronage from Europe be acknowledged if we are to uncover the complex history of nineteenth-century Christianity in southern Vietnam.
Acknowledgements

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To my closest friends, some of whom have recently submitted dissertations, or who have moved on to better things, go my warmest thanks. Brett, Dave, Nick, Mike, Len, Steve and Chris, who would have thought Canberra’s wintry Friday afternoons could be so tolerable! Last but not least, I would like to offer my deepest thanks to Anna without whose unwavering support and bright sense of humour this work would not have been possible.

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CONTENTS

Maps vi

Introduction: Catholicism and Conflict in Nguyen Cochinchina 1

1. The Rise of Nguyen Anti-Catholicism 17

2. Nguyen Orthodoxy and Catholicism: The Late 1830s Repression 55

3. Responding to Crisis: The 1840s Mission Reforms in Cochinchina 89

4. Catholicism's Alternative Paths: Local Leaders, the Priesthood and the Mandarinate 120

5. The End of Pre-Colonial Catholicism in Cochinchina 156

Conclusion 192

Bibliography 203
1. Provinces of Vietnam in the mid Nineteenth Century.


3. "Cochinchine Orientale" – East Cochinchina, est. 1845

4. "Cochinchine Occidentale" – West Cochinchina, est. 1845

5. "Mision de Cambodge" – Cambodia, est. 1850
Les provinces du ĐÀI NAM - VIỆT NAM
au milieu du XIXᵉ siècle

Les limites des 30 provinces (tỉnh) et de la préfecture métropolitaine (Thừa Thiên phủ) sont ébauchées en l’état de l’année 1851, selon la liste (ci-dessous page 249) du Kham定向 Đài Nam hồi diệc sử lục

"Cochinchine Septentrionale" – North Cochinchina, est. 1850

“Cochinchine Occidentale” – West Cochinchina, est. 1845

Introduction:

Catholicism and Conflict in Nguyen Cochinchina

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, sweeping reforms to the shape of Vietnamese rule under the Nguyen dynasty led to profound shifts in state-society relations. A key organisation which experienced the full force of these changes and in turn played an influential role in the unfolding political turmoil preceding French colonisation in 1858 was the Catholic mission, in particular the Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP). Offering only a limited view of these overlapping developments and the repercussions, modern scholarship on mid-nineteenth century Vietnam has generally concentrated on mission Catholicism, both its doctrine and organisation, as a destabilising force within Vietnamese culture and politics. Indeed, most studies have focused narrowly on the years of upheaval bridging the Franco-Spanish invasion of 1858 to 1862, analysing and explaining social tensions against the backdrop of much larger imperial hostilities. As a consequence, such analyses which emphasise tensions have described the social situation in terms of deep divisions between Catholics and non-Catholics. Little sensitivity has been accorded to change within local society, the spread of mission influence, or local perceptions of Catholics. In fact, very little is known of local experiences, of Catholics or non-Catholics, in this period. This study seeks to redress this deficiency by exploring the different experiences of missionaries, local Catholics and clergy, as well as Nguyen mandarins at different levels of the bureaucracy, by concentrating on one region, Cochinchina or former Nguyen Dang Trong, the southern half of the kingdom.

From the early 1830s, under the second Nguyễn king, Minh Mạng (r.1819-1841), the mission and the local Church faced the full force of official hostility in the form of a sustained repression, or “persecution”. According to prevailing conceptions, the anti-Catholic repression arose to a large degree from deep suspicions over cultural differences. Catholicism, a foreign doctrine, it has been argued, conflicted with local customs and life-ways, and wherever it spread tore at the fabric which held traditional society together, polarising communities and eroding the structure of authority. However, such reductionist views of social relations are ahistorical and ignore the impetus of cultural change in the shaping of local perceptions and beliefs. In early Nguyễn Vietnam, the foundations of official antipathy were neither purely ideological nor political. Moreover, the efforts to destroy the mission presence and force Catholics to recant, as I show, were disproportionate to and inconsistent with the threat, political or social, posed by this community. Contrary to the previous scholarly views of pre-colonial society, Catholics did not live beyond the margins of society. In fact, for much of the three to four decades preceding colonisation, Catholics in the far south represented a relatively well-assimilated community. Compromise and accommodation was, more often than not, the norm in grassroots relations. The portrayal of Catholics as marginal, as I will show in the discussion below, is a modern consequence of colonial and post-colonial historiography’s preoccupation with the French invasion period from the 1850s to 1870s.

I. The Externalisation of Catholicism
Modern scholarship has approached Catholicism in late pre-colonial Vietnam from different perspectives, but undoubtedly the most controversial debate has centred on the role of missionaries in the diplomatic and political machinations that led to the French invasion of 1858. While different Vietnamese scholars in the postcolonial period after 1954 from either Hanoi (the Democratic Republic), Saigon (the Republic of Vietnam), or Paris have analysed the tumultuous events of the 1850s to 1880s from different political standpoints, interpretations have almost always focused on missionaries as among the chief protagonists of the colonial invasion. From his base in Paris, Cao Huy Thuận’s incisive – and controversial – dissertation from 1968, for example, focused on missionaries such as Mgr. François Pellerin who vigorously lobbied the court of Napoleon III from the early 1850s for a military intervention in Vietnam to rescue local
Catholics from the “maniaclal” king Tự Đức. Most recently, Nguyên Văn Kiểm, a Hanoi based historian writing on the history of Catholicism in Vietnam from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, drew attention to a lineage of missionary agitators, all of whom he asserted had a piecemeal role in destabilising local political affairs. In the end, these agitators played a decisive role in undermining Nguyên rule. Of note, Kiểm cited Mgr. Pierre Pigneaux, a missionary of the MEP, and long-term supporter of Nguyên Ánh – who became the first Nguyên king in 1802 – during the long campaign against the Tây Sơn rebellion in the 1780s and 1790s. Lambasting Pigneaux’ role in Nguyên affairs, Kiểm described him as a “political conspirator” (mưu toan chính trị) who acted as a middleman for French imperial interests. In short, these perspectives make little distinction between the MEP’s objectives and French imperial ambitions.

While there is substance to the accusation that a number of late 1840s and 1850s missionaries played a key role in the political petitioning that led to invasion, that is not the whole story. Mission interests and activities, and the implications for Vietnamese Catholics demand more scrutiny than they have hitherto received. While French missionaries have been denigrated as agents of imperialism, local Catholics have been viewed almost uniformly as collaborators, French surrogates and traitors. If the criticism directed at some missionaries by scholars has been in part warranted, the treatment of Catholics in historiography in contrast has been inflammatory. In his appropriately titled monograph Some Problems with the History of Catholicism in Vietnam, Đỗ Quang Hung, for example, explained the Nguyên court’s motivation for ordering the massacre of some 4,800 Catholics in Nam Định province in 1861 as a regrettable but justified action. Appealing for understanding of the extreme pressures faced by the Nguyên court following the French invasion, Hung argued that the state treated Catholics as a primary “threat to national security” and had no choice but to deal with the issue accordingly.

2 Cao Huy Thuan, Les missionnaires et la politique coloniale Française au Vietnam (1857–1914), (Lac Viet Series, no. 13, New Haven: Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1990). I regret not having been able to access Professor Thuan’s original work which I believe was written as a doctoral dissertation at the University of Paris. Instead I have relied on a translation, which according to Thuan’s 1990 preface, was unsanctioned, Cao Huy Thuan, Đạo Thiên Chúa và chủ nghĩa thực dân tại Việt Nam (Los Angeles: Huong Que, c.1988). See also Etienne Võ Đức Hạnh, La Place Du Catholicisme Dans Les Relations Entre La France et Le Vietnam: de 1851-1870, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969); and Nicole-Dominique Lê, Les Missions-Étrangères et la Pénétration Française au Viêt-Nam, (Paris: Mouton, 1975).


4 Đỗ Quang Hung, Một Số Vấn Đề Lịch Sử Thiên Chúa Giáo ở Việt Nam [Some problems in the History of Catholicism in Vietnam], (Hanoi: 1990), p.45.
Introduction: Catholicism and Conflict in Nguyen Cochinchina

Such black and white explanations of Nguyën anti-Catholic violence from the 1850s sadly characterise the dominant historical view of community relations between Catholics and non-Catholics in the late dynastic and early colonial period. Far from drawing on a solid foundation to demonstrate that Catholics posed an immediate threat to the kingdom’s stability, such assertions are based largely on flimsy and insufficient evidence.

Redeployed over successive generations to support highly partisan views of mission and Catholic involvement in the invasion, the very limited selection of private correspondence from missionaries based in Vietnam has monopolised perceptions of local-level community relations. This correspondence has also been responsible for the simplistic depiction of cultural divisions between Catholics and non-Catholics. To understand this we need to go back to the first colonial era studies of mission Catholicism in Vietnam.

From colonial to post-1954 studies, the contribution of two mission historians, Louis-Eugène Louvet and Adrien Launay, has left an indelible mark on historiography. Members of the dominant mission organisation in nineteenth century Vietnam, the Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP), their combined œuvre, published between the 1880s and early 1920s, represents an official chronicle of mission activity. The sources for their historiography, as vast as the missions they chronicled, included general histories, monographs on particular missions, and biographies of French missionaries and local martyrs. Most importantly, as members of the MEP, these historians had exclusive access to the private archive of missionary correspondence and reports from the pre-colonial era. While Louvet and Launay each presented narratives rich in detail of the events that took place in Vietnam, their work has also carefully guarded the edifice of the mission presence in Asia.

Apart from presenting an official vision of mission experiences, the central flaw of this historiography derived from these authors’ personal experiences of Catholic communities in the colonial era. Born in the decades of ascendant French nationalism

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Introduction: Catholicism and Conflict in Nguyen Cochinchina

and raised in France in a period coinciding with the first colonial incursions in Vietnam, Louvet (1838-1900) and Launay (1853-1927) first travelled to Cochinchina in 1863 and 1877 respectively. Their arrival after the devastation and mass-violence arising from the Franco-Spanish invasion is a crucial clue to understanding their studies. As seen in my later discussion of the demographic shifts and the reorganisation of power-relations in Cochinchina in the post-1862 period, colonial rule not only provided the intellectual basis for political differentiation between Catholics and non-Catholics, it consolidated such divisions through the privileged treatment of Catholics. Moreover, the most devastating years of anti-Catholic violence occurred first in the late 1860s, and especially in the 1880s. Undoubtedly influenced by these experiences, Louvet and Launay’s studies depicted timeless and irreparable divisions between Catholics and “pagans”. More than any other residual impression, this perspective of division and social marginalisation has remained a dominant feature in modern Vietnamese historiography.

The limited release of mission archival material also led to other kinds of distortions. In writing these histories both Louvet and Launay reproduced sizeable extracts of original correspondence from missionaries based in Vietnam. These reproductions have been used widely in subsequent publications as primary sources in various secular, and sometimes anti-clerical, studies. Georges Taboulet’s documentary history of the French engagement in Vietnam, for example, draws extensively on letter reproductions extracted from Louvet and Launay’s publications. Another prominent historian, Joseph Buttinger, utilised these reproductions to highlight the adverse impact of the mission presence.

The significance of the MEP’s limited release of this material is twofold. It has led to very narrow interpretations of pre-colonial events, and, paradoxically, seen to the recycling of mission perspectives, more often than not in wholly uncorroborated interpretations. Closely resembling the anti-MEP stance taken by Cao Huy Thuan, for example, Nicole-Dominque Lê’s study sought to elaborate on the social and cultural dimensions of conflict in the nineteenth century. But denied access to the MEP archive, Lê interpreted events with a heavy reliance on the reproductions of mission

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correspondence furnished in studies by Louvet, Launay and Taboulet. In her discussion of the religious and social grounds which aggravated anti-Catholic hostility, Lê cites numerous extracts from missionary correspondence. These extracts, many from Launay’s documentary compilation *Histoire de Cochinchine*, repeatedly focus on the fundamental conflict between Catholic practices and traditional Vietnamese customs. Lê perhaps unsurprisingly interpreted lengthy quotes from eighteenth century missionaries on the proscription of polygamy and ancestor worship, only to deduce that Catholic practice was wholly incompatible with the views of élite society. She argued that the mission presence over an extended period led to fundamental shifts in local social relations. In her view, the different and “alien” cultural practices imported by Catholicism generated widespread dissonance between Catholics and mainstream society. Catholicism contributed to the modification of “religious and social structures” that led to a division between “two hostile groups”, Catholics and non-Catholics.

This brief survey of post-colonial historiography on Catholicism in late pre-colonial Vietnam reveals two assumptions: that Catholicism has not only been treated as an externally imposed ideology, imported and directed by European missionaries, but those associated with the religion, from neophytes to clergy, have been depicted as comprising a marginal community living beyond the bounds of mainstream society. These two features have led to a view of Catholic experiences of the late pre-colonial era as external to the experiences of the local social setting. Viewed as surrogates of the French mission, Catholics have in effect been treated as objects of historical change and in turn depicted in isolation from their non-Catholic neighbours. A central aim of this thesis is the deconstruction of such reductionist depictions and a revisionist interpretation in regard to the Cochinchina vicariate in the early nineteenth century.

Utilising the rich archive of the MEP, my study draws on both the Nguyễn dynastic chronicles and other records translated into modern Vietnamese, as well as the private correspondence of French missionaries based in the region. Missionary correspondence, first made available in the 1990s, offers unique insights into life in grassroots society. For much of their day-to-day information on events in their village

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9 Nicole-Dominique Lê, *Les Missions-Étrangères et la Pénétration Française au Viêt-Nam*, p.75-76.
10 Ibid. p.175.
and communities, missionaries were wholly dependent on local priests, Catholics and local sympathisers for information. For news on events in other provinces or areas of the kingdom, couriers connected a modestly extensive network of informants. Although narrated by missionaries, this correspondence offers highly detailed recollections and reports from a variety of local sources, while annual administrative reports provide details on mission structure and operations and the use of finances. When viewed over a long period, these offer a useful perspective on the gradual expansion of mission Catholicism in the region. Moreover, the “Relations” or martyr’s accounts – hagiographic accounts of local Catholics and missionary execution victims – offer a wealth of biographic detail of common subjects outside court. At the same time the volumes of personal correspondence sent by missionaries and local priests based in the region lay bare for us the individual perspectives of local life and contemporary events.

The archive also holds an array of accurately translated Nguyễn edicts and a number of examples of high profile legal proceedings which took place in Huế. While the Nguyễn chronicles record the majority of edicts issued, economies taken while producing official historiography meant that the finer detail of court views was often edited out of the final narrative. Access to the full text of these edicts, usually copied by Catholic scribes in prefectural or district offices and translated by Vietnamese priests, provides us with additional information on official perspectives. This material not only expands our understanding of mission activities, it can also be used to corroborate and complement the various Nguyễn dynastic and literary sources made available through the exhaustive efforts of northern and southern Vietnamese scholars from the 1960s. The two principal sources I use for this period are the Nguyễn Veritable Records of the Great South (Đại Nam Thức Luc) and the official biographies of distinguished mandarins and Nguyễn supporters (Đại Nam Liệt Truyện).

Both Nguyễn and French missionary sources pose problems of accuracy and bias in their depiction of events. The Nguyễn dynasty Veritable Records for the 1830 Minh Mạng era, for example, were not published until 1866 – two decades after the

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11 In the DRV, the Institute of Historical Studies (Viện Sử Học) began publishing the thirty-eight volumes of the Veritable Records in 1962 and completed the final volume, finishing the task in in 1978. To my knowledge, Saigon scholars sought only to translate small sections of the series.

12 Đại Nam Thức Luc (Chính Biên) [The Veritable Records of the Great South (Principal Era)] (Hanoi: NXB Khoa Học Xã Hội, Viện Sử Học, 1963-1978) XXXVIII Volumes; Đại Nam Liệt Truyện [Biographies of the Great South] (Hue: NXB Thuần Hóa, Viện Sử Học, 1997), 4 Volumes.
Introduction: Catholicism and Conflict in Nguyen Cochinchina

events they record, and only four short years after the 1862 Treaty of Saigon which ceded three Vietnamese provinces to French rule. On the other hand, missionary depictions of events, although contemporaneous, are often imbued with European prejudices and are sometimes distorted by their zealous Catholic worldview. Even so, each of these sources presents a unique perspective of events that can on many events be compared and corroborated.

II. Early Nineteenth Century Vietnam: Nguyen Rule and Catholicism

Although a small presence relative to the size of the general population, by the early nineteenth century the Church had been a feature of the local setting for over two hundred years, at least eight generations. Conversion to the religion and day-to-day adherence rarely signified that a family or community lived beyond the bounds of local society. Apart from belonging to a unique community, neophytes concurrently belonged to villages and had to deal with everyday matters. Members of a world Church, Catholics more immediately were also subjects of local power-structures and it is in this dual context that we need to approach Catholic and non-Catholic relations. This study takes a very different approach to the prevailing depictions of Catholicism in pre-colonial Vietnam by exploring grassroots level relations involving missionaries, Catholics, officials and members of mainstream society.

While many studies have attributed the early nineteenth century descent into conflict to the activities of missionary protagonists, or viewed Catholics as loosely allied with mission patrons, I focus on the less obvious shifts in society from the mid-1830s. But in order to throw these experiences into relief, nothing less than a large-scale reorientation in perspectives on change in early nineteenth century Vietnam is necessary. Following on from the efforts of recent explorations into pre-colonial Catholicism in Vietnam, by Alain Forest, Frédéric Mantienne and Nola Cooke, I propose a shift in focus in discussion of pre-colonial Vietnam from the preoccupation with external political pressures to one more sensitive to the local experiences of Catholics. To achieve this my study concentrates on one region, Cochinchina or

former Nguyễn Đặng Trong and specifically the far south, known early in the century as Gia Định and from the 1830s as the Six Provinces, Lục Tỉnh.

Nguyễn Đặng Trong emerged in the early 1600s as a distinct centre of Vietnamese rule, and gradually expanded its control from the longer settled Thuận Hóa area around Huế to the Mekong delta throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Breaking away from Lê-Trịnh rule in the 1620s, the Nguyễn lords (chúa) developed an outward perspective, for prosperity and survival, out of necessity to defend against repeated northern attempts to rein in the renegade polity. Huế not only looked south to the expanding frontier for resources. It also developed relations further afield in island Southeast Asia, with Cambodia to the west, among Chinese and Japanese maritime networks and European traders. Such ties drew the Nguyễn into larger spheres of influence, and enhanced Đặng Trong’s profile as a trading centre and political power.¹⁴

Đặng Trong, as demonstrated by Li Tana’s rich study of the emergence of Nguyễn rule, composed a diversity of cultural and political interests, including the remnant Cham kingdom of Panduranga, a large Khmer population in the Mekong delta and numerous upland communities in the Central Highlands.¹⁵ While characterised by an openness towards new opportunities offered by foreign trade, knowledge systems and religions, not to mention diplomatic alliances, Nguyễn dominance over this region required both creative alliances and punitive military assaults. Central to continued expansion was the sustained settlement among indigenous populations of Vietnamese or Chinese who would recognise the Nguyễn as overlords. Although this approach enabled a relatively rapid territorial expansion, it also led to distortions in the exercise of authority. Nguyễn reliance on a fluid combination of alliances and the gradual infiltration of Vietnamese settlers, while not without rigorous manipulation, also gave rise to competing regional and socio-political differences within the region, notably the far south centred around the trading centres of Đồng Nai, encompassing Gia Định and the Mekong delta.


From the 1760s, the previous decades of spectacular expansion and growth as a regional power caught up with Huế and posed a series of challenges which the Nguyễn failed to counter. Above all, a downturn in foreign trade, that had always been the crucial component of state and royal finances, led to rapid economic deterioration. A palace revolution in Huế after the death of Võ önüne (r.1737-1765) saw the new Regent exacerbate matters significantly by levying ever higher taxes, in particular on upland communities in the Quang Nam prefectures from south of Huế to Panduranga. In 1772, inspired by over-exploitation, the Tây Sơn rebellion arose in Bình Định. With support from Chinese and uplanders, as well as disgruntled Vietnamese, it engineered a series of victories that opened the way for the Trịnh invasion which led to the fall of Huế and then, in 1779, of the Nguyễn regime whose members had fled to Gia Định. The rebellion also brought about the end of Lê-Trịnh rule in Hanoi in 1788, after Tay Sơn forces defeated a Chinese army sent ostensibly to restore Lê rule there. In the following two decades a new centre of power arose in Gia Định under the leadership of a surviving prince, Nguyễn Ánh. In the 1790s, drawing on the support of an entourage that included Southeast Asian leaders and warlords as well as French naval officers and missionaries of the MEP, Nguyễn Ánh in Gia Định finally began to defeat the formerly victorious Tây Sơn. From 1798 to 1802, successive military victories saw Nguyễn Ánh’s forces recapture Huế, destroy the Tây Sơn near Bình Định, and take the northern region of Vietnam, Bắc Kỳ, with little opposition.

A clearer understanding of the political and social currents which gave rise to Dàng Trọng has been crucial to exploring the nature of Nguyễn rule in the nineteenth century. Indeed, as seen in Philippe Langlet’s majestic study of Nguyễn state historiography, enduring resentment and Nguyễn animosity towards remnant Lê supporters in the north, and the rising pressures of commanding an expansive kingdom, all had a direct impact on Nguyễn intellectual life and official behaviour. Similarly, a collection of articles by Nola Cooke have led to a series of clarifications on the composition of the Nguyễn political élite, highlighting regional affiliations, family connections and factional interests as key markers of success. Her studies have

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16 Ibid., pp.144-48.
17 Ibid., pp.147-48.
18 Philippe Langlet, L’Ancienne Historiographie d’État au Vietnam (Paris: EFE0, 1990), t.I.
dispelled colonial scholarly views of the Nguyễn bureaucracy as an idealistic meritocracy, and importantly have opened the way for more detailed analysis of individual mandarins and of broader attitudes among officials. Most recently, Choi Byung Wook’s study of the impact of Minh Mạng’s reform policies on Gia Định has highlighted the degree to which local networks, entrenched in the region since the 1780s, frustrated Huế’s centralising processes well into the nineteenth century. Together, the most important finding of these studies has been that regional differences and the Nguyễn Dàng Trong heritage had a defining and enduring influence on the early nineteenth-century political landscape and character of Huế rule.

A focus on Catholic experiences affords such an opportunity. In fact, the history of mission activity in this region, Dàng Trong, presents some fascinating parallels which hold several clues for explaining the rise of Nguyễn antipathy in the early nineteenth century. A brief history of the mission presence can help draw these into sharper focus. Although Dominican, Franciscan and Jesuit missionaries had made early inroads in establishing Catholic congregations in Vietnam from the late sixteenth century, it was not until 1658 that Rome established two vicariates here, Cocinensis, and Tunkinensis, units that corresponded exactly with the political division separating Nguyễn Dàng Trong and the Lê-Trịnh north. Mission activity in these two vicariates followed different – although not isolated – paths. By the end of the seventeenth century, owing to the success of conversions, Tonkin was divided again into two vicariates: East Tonkin, which covered the coastal Red River Delta provinces; and, West Tonkin, which stretched from west of Hanoi south to modern Hà Tĩnh. West Tonkin comprised a population of around 180,000 Catholics by the early nineteenth century; unfortunately estimates are not available for the Dominican areas. The history of Catholic expansion in Cochinchina faced different circumstances. An area of sparse Vietnamese settlement, conversion had occurred here in no less a spectacular fashion but, by the 1820s, the

22 Guillame Masson reported the population of West Tonkin at around 200,000 in 1825 (extract dated 28 June 1825 in Annales de la Propagation de la Foi [hereafter APF] X (1826-27), pp.185-86);
local Church numbered no more than sixty thousand.\(^{23}\) In the Tonkin vicariates, the mission enjoyed the advantages of ministering to a large, tightly concentrated population. In contrast, well into the nineteenth century, the thinly spread and culturally diverse population of Dàng Trong created obvious limitations.

Another problem which posed perhaps the greatest hindrance to the spread of Catholicism through the south from the late seventeenth century was the bitter rivalry between the principal mission organisations competing for the support of local congregations. The formation of the Cochinchina vicariate in 1658 also coincided with the inauguration of a new secular mission society in France, the Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP). Founded by Mgr. Pierre La Motte Lambert and Mgr. François Pallu in Paris in the 1650s, the society fell under the direct authority of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Congregatio de Propaganda Fide), an organisation founded in Rome in 1622 with the aim to centralise mission activity and curb the powers of the orders operating under the sponsorship of Spanish and Portuguese Patronage (Padroado). Although La Motte Lambert (b.1624-1679) was anointed the first apostolic vicar of Cochinchina, a position which made him the titular bishop of local Church and leader of all missionaries in the region, the MEP’s primacy was bitterly contested by missionaries of the longer established regular orders, particularly the Jesuits, who had been operating in Asia for over a century and in Vietnam for nearly fifty years.

From the late seventeenth century, the intensification of mission rivalries combined with the arrival of more Franciscan and Jesuit priests nearly led to the complete disappearance of the MEP in the Cochinchina vicariate. By the 1740s MEP missionaries were restricted to administering the small and less populated coastal plains from south of Bình Định to Phú Yên, Khánh Hòa and Champa (Panduranga).\(^{24}\) Shortly after, however, a combination of events in Dàng Trong and in Rome began to reverse the MEP’s marginal position, ultimately transforming its fortunes for good. In 1750 king Võ Vương (r.1738-1765) launched an anti-Catholic repression in which he successfully expelled all missionaries from Cochinchina. This was followed shortly after by the Vatican’s temporary dissolution of the Jesuit order. Then, in the mid-1770s,

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the Tay Son rebellion ended most Church activity in the south, forcing missionaries to flee. Yet, despite the upheaval, the MEP maintained a tentative foothold in the region, in Cambodia and Siam, enabling it to take advantage of the leadership vacuum left by the Jesuit departure. Under the leadership of Mgr. Pierre Pigneaux (1741-1799) from 1774, the MEP built close ties with Nguyễn Ánh and his exiled entourage in Bangkok and among the islands of the Gulf of Siam.25

After decades of bitter rivalry with the Jesuit and Franciscan orders in the mid-eighteenth century, Mgr. Pigneaux’ ties with Nguyễn Ánh reversed much of the MEP’s previous decades of decline. In 1786, Nguyễn Ánh entrusted his son, Phúc Cảnh, to the apostolic vicar on a lengthy sea voyage to France in the hope of winning military support and finance for his campaign. Although the treaty secured in 1789 between Nguyễn Ánh and the soon-to-be-deposed Louis XVI was effectively stillborn – the French never honoured the terms – the lengthy voyage provided Pigneaux with a considerable period in which to tutor and influence Prince Cảnh, a potential ruler. Indeed, on their return to Gia Định in 1792, after six long years abroad, Cảnh’s behaviour immediately outraged Nguyễn Ánh’s entourage when, at his elevation as crown prince, Cảnh initially refused to kowtow to the Nguyễn ancestral altar (Tôn miếu). Cảnh’s rejection poisoned the minds of many Nguyễn officials towards the mission. Pigneaux died in 1799, as did prince Cảnh two years later, but deep resentments and suspicion festered in some official circles. Nevertheless, owing to its years of support during the Nguyễn struggle against the Tay Son, the mission enjoyed prolonged and unprecedented protection throughout the Gia Long reign.

Pigneaux’s contribution to the success of Nguyễn Ánh’s campaign has attracted considerable attention and remains an ongoing and obvious point of controversy.26 Mission historiographers, such as Adrien Launay, who wrote the official account of the MEP’s history in the late nineteenth century, viewed Pigneaux’ legacy as a triumph for the mission but essentially as politically neutral.27 In stark contrast, postcolonial

Vietnamese historians have poured scorn on the apostolic vicar, describing his involvement in local political affairs as tantamount to colonialist subterfuge. More recently, access to the private archives of the MEP has enabled a more nuanced appraisal of the missionaries’ role. Pigneaux enduring impact, as Frédéric Mantienne has explained, derived not from his interference in political life but from his helping open for Nguyễn Ánh a network of relations in the world of European commerce, technical and military expertise. That mission concerns exceeded other interests is obvious and largely irrelevant. In view of the longer term agency of the mission presence in Vietnam, Pigneaux’s bit-part represents one well-sung solo in a larger unfolding drama.

III. Catholicism in Nineteenth-Century Context

By challenging the political “caricature” of mission relations with Vietnamese Catholics, Yoshiharu Tsuboi’s 1988 essay on missionary roles in local society offered a fresh direction in the study of mission influence in the Nguyễn dynasty. The inspiration for this paper arose from the failure of earlier scholarship to more rigorously investigate local perceptions, or consider why Vietnamese converted to Catholicism. Tsuboi offered suggestions as to the attractiveness of the religion, viewing Catholicism as a social movement which provided practical answers to contemporary problems. Significantly, this focus on social problems, such as unbridled official exploitation and the disenfranchisement of the peasantry under the Nguyễn, represented a marked departure in historical analysis away from the prevailing reductionist view that Catholics represented a distinct cultural class on the margins of mainstream experiences. However, mission Catholicism offered much more than an alternative social system and religious ideology, and its attractiveness extended beyond the dispossessed peasantry.

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29 Frédéric Mantienne, Monseigneur Pigneau de Behaine, chapitre VIII.
31 Ibid., p.141-42. Catholicism offered a “perspective of the long term” that involved personal reward and salvation after death, it promoted peace and non-violence, and significantly it offered widespread literacy through the promotion of a romanised script of vernacular Vietnamese, quốc ngữ – developed by Jesuits in the seventeenth century – and thus encouraged access to what was perceived to be a powerful canon of beliefs.
Most recently, Alain Forest's comprehensive study of the Tonkin mission in the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries has not only brought the long term impact of mission structures into sharper focus, but has done much to dispel the myth of pre-colonial Catholic society as marginalised and as culturally extraneous to the local world. Perhaps one of his most important suggestions is that the composition of the typical northern Catholic community generally resembled that of mainstream society. Moreover, as enumerated in several papers by Nola Cooke, locally-specific factors motivated most conversions. She has argued, from a close reading of mission correspondence, that in the early generations of its dissemination in Cochinina – during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – Catholicism was regarded according to local religious sensibilities as a "healing religion". Such approaches to Catholicism in the pre-colonial period have brought new understanding of the perceptions and cultural premises that informed Vietnamese Catholics experiences.

It is from this backdrop of parallel developments of Nguyễn political expansion and the shifting fortunes of the MEP presence that my thesis departs in order to investigate local Catholic experiences of the period's major development: the consolidation of Nguyễn rule in the first two reigns of Gia Long (r.1802-1819) and Minh Mạng (r.1819-1841). Although representing a formal shift in the re-establishment of the Nguyễn capital of Phú Xuân (Huế), this process entailed a deep politico-cultural transformation in the way the Nguyễn dynasty related to the constituent regions, from the northern region of Bạch Ký to Gia Định in the south, of the extended kingdom that it ruled for the first time. In brief, it saw a shift in the way the Nguyễn related to peripheral regions; from a reliance on close personal relations between the king and regional viceroys governance shifted to a rigidly hierarchical, centralised mode of rule.

The Nguyễn transformation from a regional to an imperial vision also included a gradual reorganisation of the kingdom's sites of worship and spiritual power to focus on

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Huế. By promoting orthodox models of social behaviour, creating new opportunities in education and in opening clear paths of advance in the bureaucracy, the dynasty sought to dismantle regionally focused affiliations in society. For example, while the Confucian examination system rewarded young men from all of different regions of the kingdom, by the 1850s the highest bureaucratic posts remained under the control of men from the capital provinces surrounding Huế. More significantly, in the short term low-level resistance in village society frustrated Huế’s vision. The Minh Mạng reign instituted the formal apparatus to exercise rule from the capital to districts and villages. Local life-ways, however, continued to pose serious obstacles to the implementation of edicts and decrees.

While official perspectives from the court can tell us much about imperial attitudes and shifts within official circles, such insights, as Ralph Smith observed, must be complemented by considering “the relationship between government and society”. In studying early Nguyễn Vietnam we need to be tuned to “the political and social realities of the period rather than of the Confucian ideal”. Despite the heavy-hand of central rule as the chief protagonist in state-society relations, village society’s resistance to the implementation of policies certainly demands attention. No matter how rigorously Huế sought to extend its reach below canton level into the village, local interests and needs more often than not prevailed. While the relationship between the state-world and local society sometimes broke down into confrontation and violence, accommodation and compromise more often resulted. The compliance of low-level officials with local power-holders and community elders was an enduring feature of grassroots society. However near or far from Huế, individual officials, as my study will show, continued to act after calculating a balance between personal interests, official responsibilities and the desire to promote local social harmony. It is in light of this subtle tension between state views and local life-ways that I explore the rise of Nguyễn hostility to Catholicism.

34 For further discussion see Choi Byung Wook, “Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mang”, chapter 3.
37 Ibid.
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The Rise of Nguyễn Anti-Catholicism

The early nineteenth century saw major transformations in Vietnam as the Nguyễn dynasty sought first to consolidate its rule and then to focus the northern region of Bắc Kỳ and Gia Định in the south onto a single dynastic centre, Huế. These changes, initiated under Gia Long (r.1802-1819) and broadened under Minh Mạng (r.1820-1841), encountered different political and social obstacles, among which the Catholic mission represented a unique challenge. Indeed, as Nguyễn centralisation gathered momentum in the 1820s, the mission organisation underwent its most dramatic reforms and expansion in over a century. Under the protection of powerful southern interests, mission activities received a major boost with the arrival of a new wave of young missionaries. Generational change was further complemented with the elevation of the Missions Étrangères de Paris, the MEP, as the principal mission organisation in the Cochinchina vicariate. It is in the context of this coincidence, of Huế’s consolidation and mission expansion, that I argue we need to contextualise Nguyễn antipathy for Catholicism in the 1820s.

I. Nguyễn Rule in Gia Định

In 1802, Nguyễn Ánh ascended the throne under the reign title of Gia Long, and for the first time in the region’s history one king ruled all Vietnamese speaking peoples within the boundaries of modern Vietnam. Despite uniting the kingdom, Nguyễn Ánh’s Gia Định base was still very much a frontier zone where communities and local authorities looked west to Cambodia and south to the Mekong for prosperity and vitality. We see this clearly in Trịnh Hoài Đức’s Gia Định Thành Thông Chí or, Geography of Gia
The Rise of Nguyen Anti-Catholicism

Dình. This contemporary perspective on politics and society presents a revealing local view of the southern social landscape, and can help us orient our understanding of the region in this period.¹

Composed late in the Gia Long reign – the book was presented to Minh Mạng in 1820 – the geography offers a wealth of local knowledge on social customs, language dialects, places of ritual and spiritual power, and administrative divisions. It is suffused with regional parochialism: full of praise for Gia Định’s power, for instance, it lacks any references to the primacy of the restored capital, Huế. One particular passage stands out for its proud description of Phiên An citadel (in Gia Định town) as a powerful symbol of the region’s recent ascendancy from the 1790s, providing a useful device to illustrate the political and social landscape at the beginning of the century.

In the final book, Trịnh Hoài Đức turns to the location of the region’s principal citadels, pagodas and shrines, markets, canals, bridges and highways; in short the region’s communal buildings and communications networks. His outline emphasises a sense of hierarchy, propriety and order, thus he begins with the most significant structure in the region, in size and command, Phiên An citadel in Gia Định town.

The citadel is used to combat the enemy and protect the people; it needs to be raised high and [rooted] in the depths, taking precautions against the unexpected, [this is] a worthy endeavour. Gia Định is the firmest protectorate (trấn) in the south, with mountains and rivers over a thousand leagues (đầm). [The landscape] is a natural barrier [to the enemies] and advantageous [to us].²

Trịnh Hoài Đức’s attention to this site is understandable considering his personal career in Nguyễn Ánh’s entourage. Born in 1765 into a distinguished family of scholars of Chinese-Fukien heritage, he was raised in Gia Định, entering service in the regime’s bureaucracy as an official shortly after Nguyễn Ánh recaptured the region from the Tây Sơn in 1788. A talented scholar, Đức rose steadily over the years to reach minister in the Board of the Interior (Lai bô) in 1813. In 1816 he was appointed assistant Viceroy (hiệp tổng trấn) of Gia Định, and it is probable that he composed the Geography while

¹ Trịnh Hoài Đức, Gia Định Thành Thông Chí [Geography of Gia Định], (Hanoi: NXB Giáo Dục, 1998).
² For this translation I am grateful to Prof. Li Tana; Chen Chingho, "Zheng huai de zhuan Jia ding tong zhi cheng chi zhi Zhu shi" [an annotated text of Trịnh Hoài Đức’s Gia Định Tong chi Thanh tri chi], in Nanyang xue bao [Journal of the South Sea Society], vol.12, pt.2, no.24 (Dec.1956), p. 1.
serving in this role. His undisguised regard for Phüen An certainly supports this. Thus he continues:

Being a screen defending the country, it is also at the strategic position to control Siam, the different Lao peoples, Malays (Cha Vâ), as well as collecting and governing the Cambodians and the mountain barbarians. [To provide vigorous leadership to the five trán, retain and consolidate the essentials of the region. The official buildings of [Gia Dình] Trân must be made magnificent in order to project [our] majesty to foreign peoples and the granaries must be sufficiently full so as to consolidate the foundations.

For over a decade Phüen An served as Nguyễn Ánh’s base and royal citadel, the focus of Gia Định’s re-emergence as a Vietnamese power. Even in the 1810s, it was no less a centre. Indeed, Trịnh Hoài Đức’s proud description emphasises the significance of Gia Định in a manner which, arguably, downplays the primacy of Huế. The new capital, associated with Nguyễn rule in the pre-Tây Sơn era, was a far away centre whose eminence flickered dimly and symbolised more a memory than a re-emerging power.

The passage also provides a nuanced perspective of the frontier attitudes of the Gia Định regional élite. As with his contemporary, Lê Văn Duyệt – Gia Định’s Viceroy briefly from 1812-1813 and then throughout the 1820s – assistant Viceroy Đức looked west to the “barbarian” territory as a region of expansion for Gia Định’s prosperity. His comments exude a cultural arrogance, but at the same time they are shaded with a deeper sense of vulnerability and exposure. Such views represented obvious dangers to the emergence of Huế as a capital of all Vietnamese territories. Although Gia Định’s vitality had enabled the Nguyễn to conquer a kingdom, its parochialism could give rise for concern.

Underlying this parochialism, as Choi Byung Wook has demonstrated, was the continued dominance of regional Gia Định interests well into the nineteenth century. Thus, at the advent of the dynasty Huế treated Gia Định differently in its integration into the new Vietnamese kingdom. Divided into five prefectures since the 1780s – Biên Hòa, Gia Định, Vĩnh Thanh, Định Tuong and Hà Tiên – the court waited until 1808 to

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3 Quôc Sử Quán Triệu Nguyễn, Đại Nam Chính Biên Liệt Truyện [Selected Biographies of the Great South Principal Era, hereafter referred to as LT], T.II, pp.198-205.
organise the area into a single, “Gia Định Thành”\textsuperscript{6}, or Gia Định Citadel. Owing to a lack of classically trained scholars loyal to the Nguyễn and the need to reward officers and supporters, most senior appointments in this early period were military mandarins and close allies who had fought against the Tây Sơn. One example of such favoured appointment was Lê Văn Duyệt, the longest serving and most controversial Viceroy of Gia Định, who had been one of Nguyễn Ánh’s most prominent field marshals.\textsuperscript{7} Duyệt’s position in Gia Định ensured firm Nguyễn control, but as Choi has illustrated the expediency of such an appointment enabled regional interests set in place in the 1780s and 1790s to continue well into the new dynasty. Even after Gia Long’s death in 1819 Gia Định remained firmly in the grip of regional interests, largely unchecked by Huế and potentially at risk of breaking away from the centre.\textsuperscript{8}

When Gia Long died in early 1819, Vietnam remained a socially and culturally diverse kingdom, still largely divided along regional lines. While the entire Vietnamese speaking region fell under the rule of a single capital for the first time, the nature of Huế’s rule was tenuous and relied on the strength of personal relations embodied in the Viceroy. In the northern region of Bắc Kính – or what was organised as Bắc Thành, similar to Gia Định Thành – remnant family and supporters of the deposed Lê-Trịnh dynasty (1428-1788) rejected the rule of a dynasty arisen, as they saw it, from a line of rebel subjects. In the south, as mentioned above, Gia Định remained a flourishing centre well into the nineteenth century and presented a potential rival to the newly re-established Nguyễn capital.

The succession of Minh Mạng at this point marked an new era of ambitious transformation in central rule. The first significant initiative of the new court was to place the examinations on a three year cycle from 1821 and re-establish a metropolitan round to award the prized doctoral degree (tiên sĩ) in 1822. This development provided Confucian educated literati from the north with a potential avenue to positions of political influence long monopolised by a generation of southerners appointed by Gia

\textsuperscript{6} “Gia Định Thành Tổng Trấn”.

\textsuperscript{7} Duyệt held the position briefly in 1812-1813, but during the 1810s held different high level posts within the government of the Trần.

\textsuperscript{8} Choi, “Southern Vietnam under Minh Mang”, chapter 2.
Long. Moreover, the emphasis on Confucian learning reflected the increased royal preference for degree holders. With each appointment of a civil official with an academic qualification, power slowly shifted from regional holders to the central bureaucracy. However, efforts to fill the bureaucracy with officials educated in the Confucian classics made little impact on local authority before the mid-1830s. Many officials in this period had still received their appointments as reward for their own or their family's support for Nguyễn Ánh's campaigns and did not display the same doctrinal rigour as more recent graduates of the examination system.

Although academic qualifications ensured greater chances of success from this period, regional favouritism still largely determined more senior appointments. The northern provinces, particularly in the Red River Delta, continued to be a source of highly capable scholars, as it had been during the Lê dynasty. It produced more laureates than the south of the kingdom, many of whom entered service following Minh Mạng’s reforms. But from the 1830s to the 1850s graduates from Huế and to a lesser extent from the Nguyễn ancestral province of Thanh Hóa, and neighbouring Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh, dominated the highest levels of court influence. Regional bias in appointments became a powerful tool to ensure the persistence of men from the central region in the political elite, especially from the late 1840s.

From the early 1830s Minh Mạng complemented change in appointments with an ambitious reform of the bureaucracy. In 1831, the former northern administration was completely dismantled and divided into a number of provinces ruled by civil governors under direct control from Huế. Provincial units replaced the territory of the former military prefectures over which higher ranked Governors-general (tổng đốc), one to every two provinces, ruled with central mandate. Though appointment was open to civil or military officers, the position of tổng đốc was part of the civil mandarinal hierarchy. A handful of other officials administered provincial affairs, typically

13 The reorganisation of the north occurred in 1831. See DNTL XI, pp.201-17.
14 In the south, these included Gia Định, Biên Hòa, Định Tường, Vĩnh Long, An Giang and Hà Tiên. The dependent kingdom of Panduranga was also integrated and made subordinate to the Bình Thuận provincial hierarchy, DNTL XI, pp.197-219.
including a financial administrator (bó chính), a chief magistrate (án sát) and a military commander (lánh binh), and sometimes a governor (tuấn phủ) for smaller provinces. Below the executive provincial level, central rule was represented by a descending hierarchy of prefects (tri phủ), district magistrates (tri huyện) and canton chiefs (tông). However, in the south enduring regional interests under the aegis of Lê Văn Duyệt ensured a stalemate in the implementation of these reforms in Gia Định. It was not until his death in 1832 that the necessary power-vacuum presented Huế with the opportunity to reorganise this region.

Just as bureaucratic order provided the foundation for the administration of the kingdom, attention to sites of ritual power were crucial to projecting the mandate and legitimacy of the dynasty. This process reached its peak under Minh Mạng and, corresponding with the transformation of administrative rule, alerts us to a key feature of Nguyễn rule, the attempt to consolidate dynastic primacy through vigorous cultural homogenisation. This process affected all facets of political life ranging from control over the region's spiritual geography to the state's historiography and perceptions of the past as well as attempts to order the social behaviour of subjects at the lowest levels of society.

Beginning in 1802 with the commissioning of temple restoration and construction to propitiate ancestral spirits and the souls of men who had died for Gia Long fighting the Tây Sơn, this process, which took several decades, ultimately saw the establishment through the Gia Long and Minh Mạng reigns of a centre-focused hierarchy of temples and sites of spiritual power. The hierarchy was organised temporally and spatially: long deceased ancestors had precedence over more recently identified spirits, and sites of worship were organised according to their location, with their proximity to Huế, or the Nguyễn home province of Thanh Hóa, as the defining reference points. Each supernatural force had a prescribed place, rank and title defined by court historians and the Board of Rites (Lê bố). The spiritual hierarchy, a Nguyễn pantheon, represented a symbolic order corresponding with the bureaucratic topography of the kingdom. Shrines dedicated to the worship of the state and dynastic protector

The Rise of Nguyen Anti-Catholicism

built in the capital had a parallel representation at the provincial level through shrines to the assembled spirits (hội đồng miếu).\textsuperscript{17} Below this, usually at the prefectural or district level, altars established to the tutelary spirits of walls and moats (thành hoàng miếu) symbolised a parallel spiritual authority to that represented by local officials in the bureaucratic and temporal realm.\textsuperscript{18} It included other spirits representing productive forces in the kingdom, including altars to the spirits of the soil and harvest (sàn tác miếu) and to the spirits forces of agriculture (thần nông).

Such meticulous organisation of spirit forces, ranging from the familial and local right through to abstract reproductive forces, reflected Nguyễn pragmatism. The sanctioned order aimed to concentrate spirit forces for the benefit of the dynasty, so that if it was hierarchical it was also eclectic. Although the spirits of deceased Nguyễn family ancestors and supporters dominated the hierarchy, the system also included Confucian and Buddhist deities, village tutelary spirits, indigenous Cham spirits, and elemental forces. Apart from propitiating and honouring such an array of spirits, temple works and the ordering of spirits had a pragmatic function embodied in the dual objective of creating harmony between the physical and supernatural, and of focusing these forces of the realm on a single centre of authority.\textsuperscript{19} Meticulous ordering enhanced the Nguyễn presence throughout the region, serving as a reminder to communities of the dynasty’s ascendancy. Over time, as this sanctioned order consolidated, and through the efforts of Minh Mạng in the mid to late 1830s, it developed, I suggest, into what might be termed a cult of state.

While temple construction provided a physical symbolisation of Nguyễn rule, historiography was an integral feature of official life in the kingdom. From the outset of the dynasty, the Nguyễn sought to project a single vision of the kingdom’s recent past. For the previous century and a half, Vietnam had been divided into two separate political entities, the Lê-ruled north, Dàng Ngoài, and the Nguyễn south, Dàng Trong. The political integration of these two historically distinct polities from the early nineteenth century required a degree of cultural eclecticism, yet despite this the Nguyễn insisted on claiming a hegemonic representation of the past that could only offend

\textsuperscript{17} Langlet, Ibid., pp.84-85.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p.87.
The Rise of Nguyen Anti-Catholicism

northern literati opinion. Central to this endeavour was the conception of the Gia Long investiture as a Restoration (trung hung). Rather than regarding 1802 as the inauguration of a new dynasty, the Nguyễn foundation myth constructed a narrative of the past two centuries which emphasised dynastic legitimacy from the 1558 arrival of Nguyễn Hoàng (1525-1613) and dynastic continuity from the pre-Tây Sơn rebellion era (1774-1799) to the Gia Long era. Thus Gia Long was always presented as a restored successor, not a dynastic founder. The narrative, as analysed by Nola Cooke, explained the Tây Sơn rebellion as an episode of supernatural tribulation. By enduring it, Nguyễn Ánh had proved himself a worthy successor to the nine generations of “spiritually-potent royal Nguyễn ancestors”, whose supernatural support had then enabled him to defeat the usurpers. In short, his victory was a proclamation of the longer Nguyễn legitimacy and an affirmation of its divine mandate. While the Restoration myth ran rough-shod over the memory of the Lê heritage, the ideological reordering of the kingdom through spiritual observance and historiographic representation saw Lê sites of spiritual significance and historiography assimilated into the Nguyễn narrative. This integration of the north drew acrimonious resistance among the northern élite and for much of the nineteenth century the resentment of Lê family and supporters in Bắc Kỳ led to numerous rebellions.

If the Gia Long reign can be characterised by the leitmotif of Restoration, as Cooke has suggested, the underlying concern of the Minh Mạng reign was the cultural integration of the diverse and dissonant communities throughout the kingdom. To counter the threat of Lê hostility and to consolidate its cultural hegemony, this reign saw not only ambitious bureaucratic reform, but also profound efforts to homogenise cultural life down to the lowest levels of society. The doctrinal motif driving this process was giáo hóa, or “education and cultivation”. In his study of bureaucratic and social change in Gia Định under Minh Mạng, Choi followed the dramatic transformations in southern attitudes to central rule and highlighted the general success of giáo hóa as an integrating doctrine. Combining the need to encourage widespread participation of men from all regions in the growing bureaucracy, the policy not only

20 Ibid., pp. 271-79.
21 Ibid., p.273.
22 Ibid., p.271.
promoted Confucian education, what it termed chinh hoc, or “orthodox studies”, but also sought to have village level society conform to what Huế perceived as culturally orthodox models of social organisation and moral behaviour. Underlying Minh Mạng’s motives for the promotion of education and cultivation was the aim to encourage and elicit greater loyalty at the lowest level of society for the primacy of the dynasty. This entailed not only an awareness of the spiritual mandate of the Nguyễn but also a regard for Huế as a central authority.

Broad political transformations in centre-periphery relations characterised political change in the first three decades of Nguyễn rule, producing the most ambitious administrative and ritual consolidation since the Lê reforms of the fifteenth century. From the early years of the Gia Long reign, Huế initiated bureaucratic and cultural reforms aimed to focus the attention of peripheral regions such as Gia Định. The transformations represented far more than an administrative consolidation; they signified a shift in Nguyễn conceptions of governance from one defined by frontier perspectives to an imperial vision. But despite the efforts of Minh Mạng’s court in the 1820s to enfranchise northern élites, or to display the dynasty’s ascendancy through temple sponsorship, staunch opposition hindered centralisation. Although the provincial reorganisation enabled Huế in theory to rule uniformly from capital to village, and the combined processes of historiographic representation and cultural assimilation diffused greater direct influence across different regions and throughout society, the reality on the ground was far different. The point of contact between Nguyễn officialdom and the local world of village life was constantly defined by negotiation, compromise and sometimes conflict. In short, no matter how rigorously Huế sought to extend its reach below canton level into the village, local interests and needs more often than not prevailed. As the next section shows, one of the organisations that wielded a certain local influence, and enjoyed considerable protection in Gia Định throughout the Gia Long and early Minh Mạng reigns, was the Catholic mission.

II. The MEP and the Cochinchina Mission in the Early 1800s

From the 1790s, the turn in the MEP’s fortunes led to a reversal of a century of disadvantage in Dàng Trong, but in the early years of the century the dramatic political

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24 Ibid., p.124.
25 Ibid., 112-19.
change in France imposed new restrictions on mission efforts. In the Revolutionary
early 1790s an attack on the MEP seminary in Paris had forced its members to flee to
London or Rome. The closure not only brought a sharp shortfall in financial support for
overseas missions, it also resulted in a decline in new missionary numbers. Well into the
Napoleonic era only a handful of new missionaries travelled to Asia to replace the
erly, ill or deceased confreres who had served since the late 1780s. In 1815, at the
fall of the Napoleonic regime, the seminary reopened in Paris and activities resumed.

The revival of Church activity in France at this point came at a momentous time
for the MEP in southern Vietnam. The late 1810s and throughout the 1820s saw the
arrival of a new wave of young French priests there, most of whom had only been
ordained months before their departure. Joseph Marchand (1803-1835), for example,
was twenty five years old when he departed France less than three weeks after his
ordination in April 1829. Most had little ecclesiastic experience, let alone an
understanding of the hardships that awaited them as missionaries in Vietnam.
Nevertheless, the arrival of this new generation led to precipitous change within the
mission structure and administration, and not only because their presence created the
largest group of missionaries since the 1780s. This generation, all born after 1790 and
thus with personal experience of the social and political upheaval of the Revolution and
the Napoleonic reign, brought to bear new attitudes and approaches on mission work.

In the first place, the early 1820s' revival helped the MEP assume full control
over the vicariate administration by the end of the decade. The death in 1823 of Mgr.
Jean Labartette, the apostolic vicar of Cochin China since Pigneaux’ death, not only saw
the passing of his generation – Labartette had been in the region since 1774 – it
occasioned a dispute over his replacement that caused the by then century-old rivalry
between the MEP and regular orders to reach a precipitous conclusion. The most

26 For a brief summary of his biographical data visit the “recherche” link on the MEP website:
www.archives.mepasie.org
27 Initially this included Auguste Thomassin (b.1794), who arrived in 1819, but died in 1824 after a
lengthy illness, Jean-Louis Taberd (1794-1840), François-Isidore Gagelin (1799-1833), who both arrived
in 1821, and François Régereau (1797-1842) and François Jaccard (1799-1838), who arrived in 1825.
Shortly after, MEP numbers were consolidated with the arrival of six more missionaries, François Brinol
in 1827 (d.1841), Etienne Cuenot in 1829 (1802-1861), Joseph Marchand (1803-1835) in 1830, Gilles-
Joseph-Louis Delamotte (1799-1840) and Jean-Pierre Mialon (1801-1832) in 1831, and François Vialle
(1804-1838) in 1832.
28 Until this time, only two non-MEP missionaries had governed as Vicars Apostolic, Pérez (Portuguese),
consecrated in 1691, and Alexandre de Alexandris (Italian), consecrated 1727; see Mission de la
Cochinchine, Paris, 1858, p.398.
The Rise of Nguyen Anti-Catholicism

senior cleric present in the vicariate, and perhaps the obvious choice, was the Franciscan Fr. Joseph, but he had not been appointed the vicariate coadjutor, a deputy position to vicar apostolic. His elevation was openly and fiercely rejected by Jean-Louis Taberd (1794-1840) – a recent arrival to the vicariate – and other MEP missionaries who not only circulated scandalous rumours claiming that Joseph had fathered a child with a local nun, but protested loudly to Rome of the Franciscan’s consistent neglect of his pastoral duties.29 The MEP request for sole authority over the vicariate was finally granted by Rome in 1827 and Taberd, the most senior MEP member, was accordingly named its new apostolic vicar, the titular Bishop of Isuapolis. By then only one Franciscan priest, Fr. Odorico remained in Cochinchina.30

For the first time in the history of the vicariate a single mission organisation assumed full responsibility over the local Church. Rome’s endorsement not only delivered MEP primacy, it once and for all resolved a long-running impasse in mission activity in the region, notably in the administration of religious observance. From the late 1820s the MEP was able to apply a uniform doctrinal orthodoxy and discipline over all Catholic congregations. Although this development only realistically impacted on a small portion of the population, it gave new weight to the MEP’s role in society and, in turn, its agency in unfolding events from the 1830s. An exploration of mid-1820s mission activity at the local level reveals how well-established the local Church was at this time.

Because missionaries offer few details of the mission organisation in their correspondence back to France our view of the vicariate administration, particularly in the 1820s, is quite limited. Most letters sent to the MEP in Paris, or on to family members, contain information and stories at the forefront of a missionary’s day-to-day experiences. In other words, missionaries only bothered to relate what they considered to be the most pressing matters. The scarcity of writing materials, limitations on time to write, not to mention the fact that the opportunity to send a letter abroad with a trusted courier often only arose several times a year, led missionaries to limit their commentary

29 On the scandal involving Joseph’s fathering a child, see Taberd’s letters for 1826 and 1827, in particular AMEP 747, 1/3/1826, pp.955-58. On accusations that the Franciscans neglected their pastoral duties see AMEP 747, 25/2/1829 pp.1029-35. Before Joseph’s expulsion in 1828, the Mission administration was divided among the MEP and the Franciscans. Parts of Đồng Nai and Gia Định and the Mekong Delta fell under the jurisdiction of the MEP, whereas the Franciscans covered Christian communities from Bình Thuận north.
30 Joseph was ordered to depart the mission in 1826. Taberd was anointed in Bangkok in May 1830.
on the banal and concentrate on the topical and unusual, so that local politics and internal mission conflicts appeared alongside edifying accounts of individuals’ religious activities. Despite these limitations, mission correspondence provides a privileged window onto the local setting, including Vietnamese Church activity, and relationships between missionaries and locals. Valuable insights and details can be gleaned from the extant correspondence; yet, as with the reading of any personal materials, individual attitudes, opinions and personalities of missionaries need to given careful consideration. Other contingencies, such as illness and personal anguish, also require note. But irrespective of such caveats, a survey of this correspondence provides an understanding of vicariate setting and the arduous life missionaries led.

In the 1820s, the mission centred on Lại ThIELD chrÉtientÉ, some fifteen kilometres north of Gia Định citadel, where new arrivals studied Vietnamese and adjusted to mission life. Language training could be a lengthy process, taking months before a newcomer could hold a fluent conversation. Joseph Marchand was an apparent exception, boasting good progress after only two months and noting that his teacher, a local priest, praised him for his correct pronunciation, “almost at the first go”.31 After achieving proficiency in Vietnamese, missionaries assumed pastoral duties, the principal means of administering the mission. The vicariate was divided into a number of loosely demarcated districts, the number of which often depended on how many missionaries were present and physically able to travel.

The smallest unit of the vicariate, the chrÉtientÉ or congregation, existed on the ground as small isolated communities scattered throughout the region, composed of a number of Christian converts often living within villages of mixed religious observance.32 Strictly organised, chrÉtientÉs resembled traditional social structures. Supervising the community between visits by local priests or missionaries, community heads, trùm, as well as lay religious leaders or catechists, cãú or ihÁy, took immediate responsibility for the spiritual well-being of neophytes. While village heads saw to good order in day-to-day affairs, lay religious leaders or catechists, most of whom were

31 Marchand, AMEP 1251, 4/06/1830, p.33-41.
32 Alan Sweeten offers the useful translation “congregation”, but this term fails to capture the evangelical optimism of the French concept of a “chrÉtientÉ” as a small Christendom. Hence, I use the French word chrÉtientÉ, which evokes the vision of mission zeal and Church expansion. Alan Sweeten, Christianity in Rural China: Conflict and Accommodation in Jiangxi Province, 1860-1900, (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies The University of Michigan, 2001), p.199, note 24.
elderly Catholics, conducted neophytes in prayers, administered baptism to children, supervised marriage ceremonies, and tended last rites to the dying. On their pastoral visits, missionaries would, where necessary, confirm the administration of these sacraments.

By the early nineteenth-century, a number of large Catholic communities had grown to several hundred in population in Cochinchina, and in some villages Catholics comprised a majority. Some of the region’s oldest chrétientés, established in the early as seventeenth century, were found around Huế. These included Dương Sơn, and trading towns along the central coast like Đinh Cát and Như Lệ in Quảng Trị province. At the other end of the vicariate, Spanish Franciscan priests are believed to have founded several Mekong chrétientés in the late sixteenth century among newly settled Vietnamese migrants in the region. These included Cái Môn, Long An, and Mạc Bác, all of which had been established along busy trading routes. Although mission work in Gia Định dated back to the seventeenth century, Catholic expansion was given new impetus in the late eighteenth century as a consequence of the Tây Sơn rebellion. Perhaps the largest single settlement occurred after Catholics from Huế fled to avoid conflict and to find refuge in the remote and sparsely settled south. During this time small and relatively isolated centres were founded in Lai Thieu and Tân Triệu near Bình Hoà, and around Thị Rịa (Bà Rịa) east of Saigon near the coast.

The lengthy pastoral visit undertaken by Mgr. Taberd in 1828, possibly one of the longest of the period, offers a good example of the demanding nature of mission work and highlights the significance such visits had for Church cohesion. Departing from Huế at the end of June, after having been called to Huế by a special edict, Taberd first travelled by boat to Phú Yên where he continued south by foot, reaching Lái Thieu in September. During his lengthy journey, which took the best part of three months, Taberd came across numerous small pockets of Catholic communities which had not seen a priest – local or foreign – in decades. Some communities had not been visited by an apostolic vicar for eighty years, nearly three generations, and most had not received one of the most important Catholic initiation rites, the sacrament of Confirmation. Yet

33 In Tonkin, especially in the coastal districts of Nam Định, substantial rates of conversion throughout the seventeenth century saw to the rise of numerous all-Catholic villages.
35 Son Nam, Đất Gia Định Xưa [The Land of Gia Định of the Past] (Ho Chí Minh City, 1984), p.54.
these communities had persisted with Catholic practice unattended for years – although they had probably lapsed into less orthodox ways. More typically, Joseph Marchand’s first pastoral visit provides a fleeting indication of average district size. Departing in early 1831 he travelled through the Mekong delta from Định Tương (My Tho), to Vĩnh Long, Châu Đốc and on to Phnom Penh. The mission district, which “from one extremity to the other took a month to travel”, encompassed “seven thousand Christians in 25 chrétientés”.

Travelling through their districts, sometimes for months at a time, missionaries visited chrétientés in order to carry out a number of administrative duties including hearing confession, baptising catechumens, holding mass, and tending to the sick and dying. Most larger chrétientés had a Church, or at the least many neophytes lived within walking distance of one. In fact, prior to 1832, as Delamotte noted, the Cochinchina vicariate had over two hundred churches dotted throughout the region. It is likely, however, that most of these Churches were little more than thatched huts. In the absence of a Church hut, a villager’s house would be used for ceremonies.

A key feature of administration undertaken by local priests and missionaries was the careful recording of the number of sacraments administered in each community – confession, communion, baptism, confirmation, and extreme unction. Although an onerous task, these were submitted to vicariate archives to be documented in regular reports to Rome. In the 1820s, such details had the simple function of indicating Church attendance, and more generally they contributed to records of congregation growth. Later, in the 1840s and 1850s, however, sacrament catalogues became a central feature of mission administration and were used for much more than internal administrative purposes. As I discuss in chapter three, the mission utilised statistics of baptisms to promote mission activities and to inspire further support in the Catholic public back in France.

The mainstay of the mission was of course the local priesthood. Unfortunately, very little information is available about local priests during the early decades of the century. The absence of biographic records makes it impossible to identify family backgrounds or even in-mission training methods. This changes in later decades when

38 Delamotte, *AMEP* 748, 10/2/1833, pp.126-30.
clergy became the backbone of mission activity against the Nguyễn repression. But in the meantime, several incidents in the early 1820s illustrate that MEP missionaries had little regard for the commitment and abilities of the local priesthood during this period. Detailing his pastoral duties in late 1824 Jean-Louis Taberd called on the MEP to send more missionaries to the vicariate in order to return discipline within the mission ranks. Over previous years, he noted, the local clergy had been wracked with scandals. Shortly before his death in 1823, Mgr. Labartette had commented that local priests in an unnamed area were “worthy of damnation for the scandals” in which they were involved. “Nearly all of them,” he exclaimed, “are engaged in filth (fécaillerie), having nothing better to do than take a woman.”

Indeed, strained relations threatened the viability of the mission.


Europeans are obliged to take the reins [of the mission], but on the other hand when one needs to do his duty, we’re made to appear as those who oppress them. We have at the moment three at the Collège [Lái Thiệu] who do nothing and two or three others who merit suspension…

This was, he added, not mentioning Father Thất, the only priest to achieve prominence – or rather infamy – in the mission in the 1820s for having sold out his confrères by deserting the clergy and renouncing the faith for a career at court. Thất’s apostasy was no simple affair. The unusual episode provides insights into how entrenched mission interests were at the local level in Dàng Trống by the 1800s. Some time before Labartette’s death a wealthy old Catholic by the name of Ông Thuận had bequeathed the mission certain fields in Quy Nhơn military department (trấn), in modern Bình Định. When Thất apostatised, he denounced the illegal holdings to department officials leading to the loss of the land.

Far from proving that the local clergy were all unscrupulous, lazy and lecherous, Taberd’s criticisms suggest more banal problems dogged the local priesthood. In 1825, the vicariate had only eight active priests, many of whom would have been elderly, an almost ineffectual number given its vast area. For the previous two decades, limited

40 Ibid.
41 Taberd, AMEP 747, 9/02/1825, pp.915-18; Jean Chaigneau also notes the event in 1823, Chaigneau, “Lettre XXX”, Bulletin des Amis de Vieux Hué 13, (Oct.–Dec. 1926), pp.443-45; see also Taberd, AMEP 747, 18/03/1826, pp.939-41.
42 Taberd, AMEP 747, 16/06/1825, pp.927-32.
resources had all but crippled the mission, preventing it from supporting a small clergy or from training a large number of students from whom to select the best candidates. For all the shortcomings of the local clergy, it was the mission’s inability to ensure adequate training that led to the shortfall in numbers. Rather, Taberd’s comments from the mid-1820s are mostly indicative of his generation’s attitudes; this new wave of missionaries found fault and a lack of fervour wherever they looked in the mission.

Starved of resources and administered by hyper-critical supervisors, the vicariate had difficulty attracting let alone supporting quality seminarians. The late 1820s, however, saw a remarkable reversal of this trend and by 1833, the mission’s fortunes had turned considerably. Not only did the vicariate support some seventeen local priests – along with eight missionaries – it also accommodated fifteen “theologians”, preparing for ordination, and, in addition, another thirteen students studying Latin. But rather than viewing this reversal solely as a result of the arrival of more missionaries and more funding, we need to ask what features and aspirations motivated Vietnamese to join the priesthood. The absence of personal testimonies makes such a question difficult to answer accurately; but we might begin by suggesting that it presented an alternative path of advance and or self-fulfilment.

The education offered by the mission did not rival local officially-sanctioned studies in classical Chinese texts, or in applicability to the normal channels of personal advance. Yet it undoubtedly offered similar marks of distinction like status and prestige, even if only within the Catholic community. All the same, the mission offered literacy and direct access to specialist knowledge, a significant advantage considering the value placed on ritual and supernatural forces in the diversity of contemporary religious communities. Yet the religious education was not the only attractive feature for young seminarians. Although not clear in early archival records, many young men joining the mission probably had some previous education in vernacular demotic Vietnamese script, chữ nôm, and/or administrative Chinese, chữ nho. Phan Văn Minh (1815-1853), for example, who was executed in 1853, joined the mission as an orphan under Taberd’s care in the late 1820s. Fleeing with the apostolic vicar to Singapore in 1833, Minh

43 Régereau, AMEP 748, 1/03/1834 [copy], p.259. The Collège de St. Joseph, as it was also known, was founded by Bishop Pigneau de Behaine in the 1780s with the permission of Nguyen Anh. Marchand notes that he – and his colleagues at the Collège – spent on average eight to nine hours a day in lessons, both receiving instruction in Vietnamese and teaching Latin. Marchand, AMEP 1251, 4/06/1830 p.42.
played what I believe to have been a crucial role in the collation of Taberd’s *Dictionarium latino-anamiticum*.\(^{44}\) According to hagiographic biography and, more recently, Võ Long Tế, Minh was also an accomplished scholar in *chữ nôm*.\(^{45}\)

For the mission, students and seminarians contributed in other practical ways. They ensured the perpetuation of a core group of believers central to assisting in the administration. Duties such as the translation of doctrinal texts or Papal letters and, closer to home, Nguyễn court documents, were essential to the survival of the mission. French missionaries depended on literate Christians for numerous other tasks, from the clerical monotony of copying letters for dissemination to the dangers of conveying them within the kingdom and abroad to Macao, Penang or Singapore. Regular communication played a crucial role in holding community networks together. Indeed, the mission’s extensive networks and ties throughout the kingdom and abroad, and close association with local communities and officials, enabled it to survive and flourish under the harshest of circumstances during the repression.

The increased effort to impose and ensure doctrinal conformity in congregations from the 1820s I suggest added momentum to the rise in clergy numbers from this period. This was achieved through more rigorous distinction between fervent and lapsed neophytes. But the greatest impact may have occurred through what appears to have been a relatively novel strategy, publicly staged examinations in the Catholic catechism. Régéreaud provides a fascinating account of this practice in early 1828, in regard to local children.

The exam is undertaken with the utmost display in order to encourage competition among the children ... With the administration of the chrétienté nearly at an end we set aside a day to examine the children on the catechism. All the catechists join in and the fathers and mothers spare nothing to help with the ceremony. In the middle of the Church a small altar is raised where two catechists call for two boys or two girls to each take a card. On this card is written this or that part of the catechism; consequently the children must know all of the catechism... Then the two children greet and then one quizzes while

\(^{44}\) Jean-Louis Taberd, *Dictionarium latino-anamiticum* (Serampore [Singapore], 1838).

the other responds. For those who make no mistake, I give rosary beads and a medal, or a catechism or an image from France; for those who make one mistake, I give them rosary beads or two medals; those who make two mistakes, one medal only ... Those who responded [the best...] receive the prize.\textsuperscript{46}

The process was followed by a procession of the participants and usually a small feast.\textsuperscript{47}

Régéréau’s description alerts us to a number of valuable details. The method of the exam strongly suggests a degree of literacy within the local population. Whether the catechism texts were composed in \textit{chữ nôm} or romanised script, \textit{quốc ngữ}, is unclear, but with young girls participating in the game and reportedly able to read the questions and answers, \textit{quốc ngữ} seems more likely. Apart from revealing the tightly organised world of chrétienté life, Régéréau’s anecdote highlights the fact that adherence to the religion was an active process. It not only required constant religious observance but also participation in Church and community life. Once baptised, the mission constantly urged neophytes to reaffirm their faith through attending Mass and submitting to the confessional box, or through participating in such doctrinal activities as described by Régéréau.

The attention to doctrinal rigour, the rise in numbers of local clergy, and missionaries’ increased pastoral presence throughout the vicariate highlights the MEP imperative to maintain and enliven the fervour of local Catholics. In turn, this reminds us that local adherence to the religion was far from uniform across the region, or over time. Spread thinly across such a vast vicariate, no single identity can be used to model the typical Catholic. Without delving into this issue in detail here, it is worth offering the preliminary – and somewhat obvious – remark that personal convictions played the most important role in individual Catholic identity. What the mission recognised as acceptable Catholic behaviour, adherence to doctrine, exemplary behaviour, and submission to priestly authority, did not always accord with local attitudes and self-perception. For example, after arriving in Cochin China in mid-1830 Marchand complained bitterly that on the voyage from Macao to Saigon on a Chinese junk he had been placed in a cabin with the ship’s “devil”, that is an altar to a guardian spirit, a privilege organised especially by the captain as an honour. Yet the captain was, as


\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
Marchand noted, “a baptised pagan” and clearly saw no conflict in his maintaining a shrine and associating with Christians.\(^{48}\)

This conflict certainly did not accord with Church teachings, yet many locals identified themselves as good Christians and felt strong convictions even if they could not always, or did not in some important respect, adhere to Church teachings. Chief among this group I suggest were Catholics in the Nguyễn bureaucracy and the army. As several examples in later chapters will bear out, community figures of elevated status willingly placed their lives and fortunes at great risk for the sake of their beliefs. Some of these might be clearly identified as good Catholics. But others, such as salaried mandarins, had to find a compromise between their religious obligations and official duties.

In the mid-1820s, the MEP functioned as a modestly resourced organisation, largely dependent on the support of neophytes, and entirely at the mercy of the goodwill of local officials. Yet owing to the previous decades of neglect, competition with the Franciscan order and a lack of funding, it suffered from serious administrative weaknesses. Not only did the MEP have trouble maintaining and attracting candidates to the clergy, the existing priesthood contained troublemakers who posed greater hindrance than help. Towards the end of the decade, however, its fortunes turned with the arrival of a new wave of young and fervent missionaries. Moreover, their arrival coincided with Rome’s granting the MEP sole custodianship of the Cochinchina vicariate administration. From this period, and armed with greater resources, the MEP initiated a dramatic turnaround. It not only attracted more candidates for the local priesthood, but also expanded college and educational activities. These successes ended the slow decline of the local Church and, as I have suggested, can be attributed largely to the increased pastoral care of missionaries from the late 1820s.

III. The Rise of Nguyễn Anti-Catholicism

As my earlier discussion of Gia Định and Nguyễn rule demonstrated, by employing a range of bureaucratic and cultural strategies Huế sought to consolidate its control over peripheral regions. The transformation, which involved bureaucratic centralisation, a reordering of the kingdom’s spiritual geography and the doctrine of giao hòa, characterised the Nguyễn imperial vision of expansive rule and cultural

\(^{48}\) Marchand, *AMEP* 1251, 4/06/1830, pp.33-42.
homogenisation. While the Gia Long and early Minh Mạng reigns were largely successful in imposing a Huế-centric vision, a number of features of early nineteenth-century society continued to impede the exercise of uniform administration from capital to prefecture, from district to village. The main obstacle to central rule in this period, indeed an enduring obstacle for much of the century, was the inability to assert official authority down to the lowest levels of society. In fact, underlying Minh Mạng’s motives for the promotion of education and cultivation was the aim to shift loyalties at the local level away from local-regional interests.

From 1802, the Nguyễn court had moved gradually to reconfigure the bureaucratic and religious hierarchies in the kingdom, seeking to subdue all rival political and religious identities. The most intensive period of this transformation, as highlighted by both Philippe Langlet and Tạ Chí Đại Trường, occurred between 1831 and 1833.49 In this short period earlier efforts, such as Minh Mạng’s attempts to raise the profile of Confucian studies and his encouragement of northern literati to participate in the bureaucracy, enabled the court to undertake its most ambitious reform, provincial centralisation. Although such reform was possible in the tightly controlled north in 1831, Viceroy Lê Văn Duyệt’s prominence made it impossible in Gia Định. Adding to this difficulty was the mission presence.

Throughout the Gia Long reign Huế openly tolerated the mission, but in some sections of the mandarinate officials made no effort to conceal their distrust and antipathy. The advent of the Minh Mạng reign opened the way for the venting of their hostility. The rise of Nguyễn animosity towards Catholicism in the 1820s needs to be understood in two contexts. Huế recognised the mission’s prominence in Gia Định power-relations, notably its close ties with Lê Văn Duyệt, as a general threat to the primacy of the capital. Also, the court increasingly recognised the mission’s unique position in grass-roots society as a major threat to the exercise of royal authority. A brief overview of the rise of tensions will bring these aspects into sharper focus.

As early as 1803, missionaries based at the Nguyễn court in Huế reported on growing antipathy among officials towards the Catholic presence. One year into the Gia Long reign and only three years after an extravagant funeral for Pigneaux at Saigon, Mgr. Labartette reported that the new court only continued to tolerate the religion for

The Rise of Nguyen Anti-Catholicism

purely political reasons.\(^{50}\) Shortly after, in April 1805, Grillet – an MEP missionary based around Champa and Khánh Hòa – reported with incredulity that permission had been refused to build new Churches.\(^{51}\) And a year later Labartette noted to his superiors in Paris that at the drafting of the new legal code for the kingdom, there had been deliberation over whether the religion should be proscribed.\(^{52}\) Such reports continued throughout the Gia Long years and raised missionary anxiety. But they signify more the simmering grudges of individual and factional attitudes rather than widespread or systematic antipathy. The MEP still enjoyed the protection of the king and prominent figures such as Viceroy Lê Văn Duyệt.

In the early 1820s, the court did not move openly against the religion. Although, Minh Mạng openly threatened to expel all European, missionaries and advisors such as Jean Chaigneau.\(^{53}\) Instead, it seems that in some area hostility was allowed, and possibly encouraged, within the mandarinate. On numerous occasions in the late 1820s mandarins acted beyond the orders of the court against local Catholics. Mgr. Taberd, for example, reported in 1826 that officials regularly harassed converts and local clergy in Quang Nam without royal authority.\(^{54}\) In 1826 and 1828, “secret” edicts issued by a group of officials hostile to Christianity allegedly circulated through some central provinces.\(^{55}\) In late 1830 another such “edict”, or what was most probably illicit correspondence between officials, caused widespread strife for local Catholics.\(^{56}\) According to Taberd, it was first passed around Đinh Cát in Quang Tri where it led to the destruction of six churches. The attack spread to Quang Nam, and as far south as Binh Thuận.\(^{57}\) Yet in Gia Định, Viceroy Lê Văn Duyệt ensured the continued protection of mission interests.

Lê Văn Duyệt, a native of Gia Định and one of Gia Long’s most esteemed generals, had been a notable supporter of Pignaix during the 1790s, and had long treated the mission favourably.\(^{58}\) While anti-Catholic hostility grew in some sections of

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\(^{50}\) Labartette, *AMEP* 747, 17/9/1803, pp.57-60.


\(^{52}\) Labartette, *AMEP* 747, 16/4/1806, p.273.


\(^{54}\) See for example, Taberd, *AMEP* 747, 18/3/1826, pp.939-41.


\(^{56}\) Taberd, *AMEP* 748, 6/6/1831, pp.1-7. Tells that Catholics in Đinh Cát, Quang Tri province were aware of a covert edict against Christians.

\(^{57}\) See also Taberd, *AMEP* 748, 28/7/1831, p.17.

\(^{58}\) *LT* II, p.396.
the mandarinate in the 1820s, Duyệt openly interceded in disputes on behalf of the mission. The most prominent example occurred in 1828 after Minh Mạng ordered all foreign clergy in the kingdom to travel to Huế.\(^{59}\) Of the ten missionaries in Vietnam at the time only three from Gia Định made the trip, Mgr. Taberd, François Gagelin and Fr. Odorico. Believing in the transparency of the court’s intentions for these missionaries – they were called to work as translators – Lê Văn Duyệt had insisted the three depart.\(^{60}\) Indeed, suspicious of court designs, not a single missionary from Tonkin responded to the request. The conditions of the edict were soon apparent as the court ranked the three at the lowly rank of seventh grade mandarins (thất phẩm)\(^{61}\) – in stark contrast to the prominence enjoyed by Pigneaux and more recently Chaigneau – and strictly forbade them from leaving the capital to “teach students or spread the religion”.\(^{62}\) What had begun ostensibly as recruitment for translation duties, turned into arrest and detainment.

But in a demonstration of his support for the mission, Lê Văn Duyệt travelled personally to Huế in mid-1828 to secure Taberd’s and Gagelin’s release. An undertaking omitted from the dynastic records, this gesture echoed growing tensions between Lê Văn Duyệt and Huế over the Viceroy’s high level of personal influence and his close ties with the mission.\(^{63}\)

In the early 1830s Taberd continued to petition Duyệt directly for intercession in the illicit targeting of Catholics outside Gia Định, notably after authorities in Qui Nhơn imprisoned eight Catholics in 1831.\(^{64}\) In this example a district magistrate ordered the chrétienté head to recant by walking over a wooden cross, refusing to do so he was consequently sentenced to exile. But because the official knew that no orders had been issued for such action, the sentence was reduced to a number of strokes of the rod and a

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59 A year earlier, the two Court advisors from the Nguyễn Ánh period, Chaigneau and Vannier, had returned to France.
61 There are several interesting disparities between Taberd’s account and the Court’s. First, the records state the three were awarded the title of seventh grade officials (thất phẩm); Taberd claims they were made mandarins of the “premier class”. Georges Taboulet, La Geste Française en Indochine (Paris, 1955), t.I, pp. 326-27.
63 Taberd, AMEP 747, pp. 1029-35. François Jaccard was sent to Huế to replace Taberd.
64 Taberd claims one had died, but this is contrary to Régéreau’s letter dated 21 June, 1831.
period of imprisonment.\textsuperscript{65} At Taberd’s request, Duyệt intervened to secure their release by paying-off the official with a number of silver taels.\textsuperscript{66}

Lê Văn Duyệt’s repeated intervention on behalf of the mission demonstrates the sway he held as a regional power-holder. It also suggests the value he placed on maintaining firm ties with the mission, and herein we see a dangerous conflict of the personal with the political. As a Gia Định era general, the Viceroy well understood the value of a broad-based entourage of allies for the region’s eminence and his own personal authority. Moreover, it is certain that Duyệt, a close supporter of Nguyễn Ánh, considered the mission with gratitude for its support of the regime during its darkest years in the 1780s. However, by 1832 Duyệt – at seventy years of age – was no longer the rigorous general of the Gia Định era and in August he died after a short illness. As a major beneficiary of his patronage, the mission’s fate was tied to Duyệt’s, his death saw the end of the mission’s fortunes.

In early 1832 news reached Mgr. Taberd in Lái Thiêu, near Gia Định citadel, that a disturbance involving a large chrétienté neighbouring Huế had resulted in the arrest of a large number of Catholics. The matter first arose in 1830 from a dispute over field boundary markers between the nearly all-Catholic village of Dương Sơn and its neighbour Cồ Lào.\textsuperscript{67} François Jaccard, who had been detained at court to act as an official translator since 1828 reported that for reasons clouded by tensions, some villagers from Cồ Lào staged a “laying-down protest” (niêm vả), a demonstration which entailed the plaintiffs blocking two sides of the fields with their bodies.\textsuperscript{68} Although

\textsuperscript{65} Regereau, AMEP 747, 21/6/1831, pp.27-29. Régéréau claims the king had not issued an edict calling for the persecution of Christians because he feared a rebellion in Tonkin “where there are many Christians.”

\textsuperscript{66} Taberd, AMEP 747, 3/1832, pp.105-12.

\textsuperscript{67} Dương Sơn was situated less than ten kilometres east of the Royal citadel, near the mouth of the Perfume River.

\textsuperscript{68} Alexander Woodside’s translation of a court memorial submitted to Minh Mạng on the matter illuminates the complications which arose:

In our jurisdiction there is Cồ Lào village in Đồng Lầm canton in Quảng Điền district. Three of its retired village chiefs, Hoàng Tằng Đạo, Phạm Hữu Đoạn, and Phạm Văn Chất, have laid the accusation that the boundary of their village’s public lands squeezes the boundary of the fields of Dương Sơn village. On the fourteenth day of the seventh month of this year [August 1830] the village chief of Dương Sơn village Trần Văn Tài, who has Christian habits and in sum does not respect the law, on his own authority led the village’s soldiers and people to that spot, where they built up with earth a new path which violates [Cồ Lào] village’s old graves. Moreover they took the stone tablet markers [of the fields] moved them to another place … [A retired village chief of Cồ Lào] led his village men en masse to a brawl, his village soldiers and people were wounded … they protested to the district, which decided that their village was the one that should be curbed. They renewed their outcry [at this] and it reached the prefecture.
Duong Son’s villagers were exonerated at the district level, the matter was raised to the attention of the Punishments Board (Hin bô) which reversed the judgement. In June 1832, after the case had been reviewed, the Punishments Board issued a sentence against Duong Son, the local church was demolished and some seventy-three villagers were arrested and placed in stocks and chains. The court memorial for the event began by claiming that Duong Son village’s long term adherence to the “Religion of Jesus”, đao Gia-tô, was a major source of the disturbance. Accordingly, it also cited François Jaccard – “Phan Văn Kinh” – as a chief protagonist, claiming somewhat vaguely that his spreading the religion and gathering followers to worship had contributed to the community dispute. The court stripped the missionary of his official title as a mandarin, reducing him to service as a common soldier in the royal citadel, and placed him under strict supervision.

The villagers of Duong Son village, however, were far less fortunate and faced severe punishment. According to the case documents obtained by the mission’s local go-betweens, the Punishments Board tribunal led by Phan Bá Đạt found Duong Son guilty of attacking Cò Lão without pretext and of illegally seizing land. As a preliminary measure, the guilty party were exhorted to renounce the religion by walking over a wooden cross. All apparently refused and consequently harsh sentences followed. It dealt the two village elders, Phạm Văn Khoa, and the village head (ly truông) Trần Văn Tài, death sentences. In the end, however, Khoa was executed by garrotte, while Tài was sent into lengthy exile. In turn, the men of the village were conscripted into the royal army and sent to frontier divisions and the women were dispersed to military settlements (đôn điện). Trần Văn Sơn, an army officer, and thirteen soldiers were sentenced to a month wearing cangues, issued with one hundred strokes of the heavy rod, and sent as common soldiers to the provinces of Quảng Ngãi and Thanh Hóa. Further to this, the court turned its attention to weeding out Catholics within the ranks.
of the army, ordering soldiers to demonstrate their rejection of the religion by walking over a cross.73

The punishment of Dương Sơn village, which saw the elevation of a relatively minor dispute to royal notice, was symbolic of the major political transformations taking place in the kingdom at this time. Huế shifted from attempting to contain the mission presence, a position seriously compromised by Lê Văn Duyệt’s open support for missionaries in Gia Định, to actively seeking its destruction. Shortly after Lê Văn Duyệt’s death, in August 1832, the court moved swiftly to reorganise Gia Định into provinces, bringing an end to the firmly entrenched regionally-oriented order there. First and foremost, the court elevated selected officials to executive positions throughout the newly created “Six Provinces”, luc tỉnh, of the south, in order to replaced Duyệt’s protégés and allies. Nguyễn Văn Quê, appointed by Minh Mạng to the post of Gia Định region military in 1831, was promoted to Governor-general (tông đốc) of the Gia Định and Biên Hòa provinces.74 And Bạch Xuân Nguyễn, until then the Thừa Thiên prefect,75 was selected as Gia Định’s financial administrator (bổ chinh).76 Before being sent to Gia Định, Bạch Xuân Nguyễn had probably supervised the arrest and investigations into Dương Sơn village.77 Coinciding with this development, in January 1833 the court issued its first kingdom-wide proscription of Catholicism.78

The appointments of Bạch Xuân Nguyễn and Nguyễn Văn Quê had an explicit political edge, to neutralise and dismantle Duyệt’s heritage. One of the first tasks assigned to these officials was the preparation of a report of misdeeds committed by the Viceroy. The order, which uncovered numerous bureaucratic transgressions, resulted in Duyệt being sentenced posthumously to a series of penalties which were intended to bring the greatest possible humiliation to his memory.79 In a great affront to the Viceroy’s legacy and prestige, Duyệt’s tomb was bound in chains and, according to

73 Delamotte, AMEP, 748, 10/2/1833, p.126.
75 DNTL X, p.179. Prior to this Bạch Xuân Nguyễn held the post of adjoint prefect, Phú Thừa.
76 See DNTL IX, p.188, and X, p.164. The title of Bổ Chinh is more accurately translated as “Chief financial official”, yet the position, as a deputy to Governor, Tông Đốc, took in a range of administrative tasks.
77 DNTL XI, p.84.
78 DNTL XI pp.235-36.
79 See for example Li Tana’s discussion of the misappropriation of funds for the gathering of hardwood to sell onto Chinese merchants or to construct ships, Li Tana, “Ships and Shipbuilding in the Mekong Delta, c.1750-1840”, p.127.
The Rise of Nguyen Anti-Catholicism

Taberd, administered eighty blows of the heavy rod. Taberd, administered eighty blows of the heavy rod. The accusations against Duyệt’s leadership varied and, according to Mgr. Taberd, were largely exaggerated. Rather, their substance transcended the personal and symbolised an attack on the network of personal relations which the Viceroy had surrounded himself with in Gia Định. Under Duyệt’s rule numerous communities enjoyed special privileges and a high degree of protection from Huế rule. Prominent among these were the convict groups re-settled in Gia Định from the early 1800s, Chinese merchants and immigrants, and Catholics.

Gia Định’s Catholic community, which by conservative estimates numbered at least 20,000, had benefited enormously from Duyệt’s rule and the arrival of the January 1833 edict brought immediate disaster. Within weeks of its issue virtually all churches throughout the vicariate were either dismantled or destroyed. The edict’s arrival in the south created panic, bringing to a sharp end all mission activity. Students at the Lái Thiệu seminary dispersed, and missionaries sought shelter from the threat of arrest. By February-March, the majority of missionaries, including Régéreaud, Vialle, Taberd and Cuenot, had fled west to Cambodia and Siam in anticipation of a bloody repression. In some areas, anti-Catholic hostility spread immediately. In Nha Trang and Bình Thuận, for example, officials moved swiftly to arrest lay leaders, including catechists and chrétienté leaders, threatening them with decapitation if they did not publicly renounce the religion. Most submitted out of fear, but those who refused were beaten and physically forced to recant. In another example, apostates in Bình Thuận were taken to pagodas and made to bow before a “pagan” altar as final proof of their renunciation.

80 Taberd, AMEP 748, 20/12/1832 pp.89-96.
81 Ibid.
82 Convict settler groups included pardoned soldier-convicts, Hôї Lương, convicts from the northern provinces, Bắc Thuận, and, captured insurgents from rebellions in the 1810s in Thanh Hóa, and Nghiêі An, known as Thanh Thuận, and An Thuận respectively. Exiled to the south in the early years of the nineteenth century, northern criminals and captured rebels formed a vital body of manpower for settlement, agricultural clearing, and, when necessary, for use as soldiers. But in sharp contrast to Huế’s initial intent, this group enjoy the privileges of free settlers and had subsequently dispersed widely through the region. The 1832 reforms threatened to reverse this arrangement, and many faced being forced into convict military camps on the frontier (Choi, “Southern Vietnam under Minh Mạng”, pp.60-64). Chinese refugees and merchants, had been settling in the region since at least the seventeenth century and held an unmatched superiority in commercial enterprise in the Mekong and along important trading entrepots along the Gulf of Siam. The Nguyễn lords had offered refuge to Ming supporters 1679 on the condition they settled in Biên Hòa and Mỹ Tho (Li Tana, Nguyễn Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, SEAP, 1998), p.33.)
83 Delamotte, AMEP 748, 10/2/1833, pp.126-30.
84 Régéreaud, AMEP 748, 1/3/1834 [copy], pp.257-84; and Vialle, AMEP 748, [date unknown, 1833?] pp.117-19.
85 Régéreaud, AMEP 748, 1/3/1834, pp.260-61.
Motivated by the dramatic rise in hostilities, Catholics joined the ranks of a small rebel force led by Lê Văn Duyệt’s chief retainer and adopted son, Lê Văn Khôi. In early July 1833, drawing on the combined interests of Chinese, northern criminals and allied officials within the Nguyễn bureaucracy, Khôi led a party to Gia Định and with little resistance captured Phien An citadel. Most of the surrounding provinces, Biên Hòa, Dinh Tưởng and Vĩnh Long fell shortly after, often with the collaboration of local district officials. With only limited time to consolidate his control, Khôi rallied willing local officials to his side. The administration of the region was reorganised and new ministries established. Khôi elevated Catholic leaders to positions of authority and issued an edict allowing Churches to reopen. An army was formed among the soldiers garrisoned in the citadel, as well as prisoners and remnants of Duyệt’s Left Division (từ quân).

Khôi followed the example set by Nguyễn Ánh in the 1780s by attempting to recruit mission support for the rebellion. Shortly after seizing Phien An citadel, he dispatched small deputations, formed among the chrétienté heads surrounding Gia Định town, across the region in an attempt to gather Catholic support. One deputation, led by a lay leader, crossed west to Phnom Penh (Nam Vang) and attempted to entice Régéreau, who had fled in mid-1833 with over 200 Catholic refugees, to return to Gia Định. A second group, headed by Vietnamese priests, departed for Siam to recruit Mgr. Taberd who departed at the first sign of danger in early 1833. This deputation, numbering nineteen, according to Régéreau, ended in disaster in Hà Tiên. Betrayed to the port governor (“ông Khánh vê nhi”), the group was arrested and taken to Châu Đốc, a busy Mekong river town on the frontier with Cambodia, where they were tortured and later executed. This misfortune delivered a parcel of letters into the hands of Nguyễn officials, correspondence which apparently included a personal request from Lê Văn Khôi for Siamese military support.

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86 Day 18, month 5 of year 14 Minh Mạng, according to LT IV, p.476. Régéreau notes the same date “17th or 18th of the 5th month 1833, or the beginning of July”, Régéreau, AMEP 748, 1/3/1834, pp.257-84.
88 The Left Division (từ quân) was a private army formed during the Gia Định regime years. Régéreau, AMEP 748, 1/3/1834 [copy], p.266.
89 Régéreau, AMEP 748, 1/3/1834, pp.263-66.
90 Ibid., p.271.
91 Ibid., pp.267-69.
92 In September 1833 Taberd organised for a local cleric, Paulus Thang, to be sent to Hà Tiên to gather any local priests and students he could find and return word of events in the region. Thang wrote to
A third deputation, sent to the lower Mekong chrétienté of Mạc Bạc, Vĩnh Long province, succeeded in attracting the support of one of the three remaining missionaries in the vicariate. For the previous year Joseph Marchand had been convalescing after suffering from lengthy illness, but isolated from his confrères he was easily persuaded to travel to Chợ Quán chrétienté, neighbouring Gia Định citadel. Le Văn Khôi delegated Marchand to pastoral responsibilities over the neighbouring Catholic communities, a position which placed the missionary in an ambiguous position and ultimately implicated him in the rebellion. From this point, around July to August 1833, events spiralled out of control in Gia Định. After several confrontations with Nguyễn forces the rebel army was forced to retreat to the security of the citadel, including around two thousand supporters, including Marchand and a number of the local Christian community. This stalemate lasted for over two years.

At the beginning of September 1835, the rebels capitulated and the besieging royal army took the citadel. According to Nguyễn records some 1,278 people were taken captive, men, women and children, all of whom were rounded up and taken outside of the town where they were executed and buried in a mass grave. The remnant leaders, including Joseph Marchand, were placed in bamboo cages and dispatched to Huế. Arriving in mid-October they were interrogated and following several weeks of torture sentenced to death. At the end of November the group, with Lê Văn Khôi’s remains, were paraded from the royal citadel to the village of Thọ Đức, within sight of the capital. As rebels, these leaders were executed by slicing and dismembering (vứt lạng tri), which involved the cutting of large sections of flesh from the victim before beheading. As a method of execution death by slicing was as much intended for ceremonially destroying a criminal’s body as it was to cause eternal discomfort for the deceased’s spirit in the afterlife. Afterwards, the bodily remains were carried through several neighbouring villages and then disposed of in the sea. To ensure

Taberd informing him of the tragedy met by the deputation. He wrote that a number of letters, reported from Marchand and students of Taberd’s, were intercepted when the deputation was betrayed in Hạ Tiên. Thặng’s letter to Taberd, dated 23 September 1833, appears as a translated (from Romanised Vietnamese, quốc ngữ ) transcription in Taberd, AMEP 748, 21/1/1834, pp. 237-40.

Unfortunately a full name and further details on this priest are not revealed by the archive.

Jaccard estimates only around 200 hundred Christians were given shelter in the citadel, AMEP 748, 12/10/1833, pp. 143-44.

DNTL XVII, 1835, p.48; LT IV, p.497.

Lưu Trịn (Bộn Bang), Nguyễn Văn Châm (Trần), Lê Bá Minh (Minh), Đỗ Văn Đự (Đu), and Khôi’s son, Lê Văn Viễn. Marchand is noted as Phú Hội Nhơn, DNTL XVII, 1835, p.51.
the widest impact royal provision ordered that the severed heads of the leaders be paraded and displayed throughout the provinces in the north.97

IV. Joseph Marchand: Symbols of Rebellion

Few missionaries have provoked as much speculation in scholarship on pre-colonial Vietnam with as much controversy as Joseph Marchand, whose capture at the fall of Gia Định citadel in 1835 has been used both to symbolise Catholic suffering in this period or demonstrate increased mission political activism from this period. Given the extraordinary circumstances of his presence, arrest and elaborate execution, such differences of opinion would seem inevitable. Indeed, the presence of a French missionary, whose mission organisation ostensibly rejected participation in local political affairs, among Gia Định’s rebels, whose aim was to end Nguyễn rule in the south, presents obvious grounds for debate.

In the immediate aftermath of the rebellion, and the devastation of the Catholic Church in Vietnam, missionaries such as Delamotte reported back to France of the turn of fortunes that led Marchand to seek refuge with the rebels in 1833. According to his account, dated from December 1835, only weeks after Marchand’s execution, the young missionary was forced into a compromise from which there was no escape. Ever since, mission historiography has portrayed Marchand as an innocent victim of the rebellion, as seen in the initial study undertaken by Jacquenet in 1851, and subsequently by Louvet’s history of the mission in Cochinchina (1885) and Launay’s general history of the MEP (1894).98 Elevated to the status of a martyr in 1900, Marchand was canonised in 1988 along with over twenty other French missionaries, many of whom were executed in the 1830s to 1850s.

While mission perspectives have cast Marchand as a victim of Nguyễn excess, others have been far less forgiving. Historians from the colonial era, from Schreiner to Sylvestre, described him as an active, albeit naïve, participant.99 And more recently, postcolonial Vietnamese scholars, such as Nguyễn Phan Quang and Nguyễn Văn Kiểm,

97 APF IX. 1836, pp.573-89.
placed the cleric at the very centre of the revolt.\textsuperscript{100} Describing Marchand as a clandestine agent of French and Catholic mission imperialism, the Hanoi historian Nguyễn Phan Quang, in his 1974 article, rejected the official mission thesis to describe the missionary’s presence in terms of a slowly unfolding imperial conspiracy.\textsuperscript{101} Quang emphasised Marchand’s youth, his zealously and enthusiasm (xông xáo, hâm hù) for the mission’s cause. But such details mattered little; Marchand was nothing less than the “principal figure” of the rebellion’s “ringleaders” (người chủ trí nhóm cầm đầu).\textsuperscript{102}

Although a highly contentious example, as Jean Chesneaux observed nearly fifty years ago, the focus on Marchand has had more to do with efforts to highlight “opportune precedents” to explain later French imperial endeavours.\textsuperscript{103} Indeed, the portrayal of Marchand as a hostage to rebel interests or as a political agitator has long diverted attention on to mission interference in Vietnamese politics and consequently has distracted scholarship away from the local repercussions. Access to Marchand’s original letters from the MEP archive offer the opportunity for us to dispense with some well-worn myths.

Despite the controversial circumstances of his presence in Gia Định citadel, it appears most likely that Marchand played an insignificant and incidental role in the revolt. In short, I argue, Marchand was an accidental rebel. Still only thirty years of age in 1833, he had only been in the vicariate for two years, and for much of this time had been ill with what appears to have been encephalitis.\textsuperscript{104} Marchand travelled to Chợ Quán in late mid-1833 on the persuasion of a local priest, but it is telling that he had even remained in the vicariate, months after his confères had fled west to Cambodia and Siam in fear for their lives. Not only was he lacking in experience in local affairs,


\textsuperscript{101} Nguyễn Phan Quang, Cuộc khởi binh Lê Văn Khôi, p.177.

\textsuperscript{102} Nguyễn Phan Quang, “Văn đề có Du (Marchand)”, p.53, 67.


\textsuperscript{104} At 26 years of age, Joseph Marchand (1803-1835) was one of the youngest missionaries to be sent to the region, departing France for Cochinchina only weeks after his ordination in 1829. In a letter to his parents in 1832, he mentions that he had been ill for much of 1831. This is confirmed by Taberd, who notes in late 1831 that Marchand was still quite weak and unable to undertake full duties (Taberd, AMEP 748, 20/12/1832, p.93.)
he was probably still suffering from the effects of prolonged illness. The most compelling evidence comes from Marchand’s final letter of September 1834, written in Gia Đình citadel. Until recently, only a printed version of this letter had been available for analysis, available in Eugene Louvet’s history of the Cochinchina mission and George Taboulet’s documentary survey. On reading the original, it is obvious that the published reproduction is a heavily doctored and carefully edited text. For in the narrative of the original we are presented with the experiences of a highly erratic author, obviously ill and undoubtedly deeply depressed. Marchand is almost incoherent in his explanation of the rebels’ political designs and he jumps from one topic to the next, giving the unmistakeable impression that he was too unwell to have been of much use to their plans. Instead, his letters suggest that he himself was used by the leaders for particular purposes. An important clue to understanding Marchand’s involvement can be found in several “prophecies”, or what were probably little more than popular rumours, reportedly circulating through the south in 1833.

According to Régéreau, the hiding in Phnom Penh, one “prophecy”, no less than millenarian in vision, claimed that “when the Elephant’s teeth” – supposedly an expression for Europeans – came to dominate the region “all will be delivered from their long servitude and cruel slavery and will live in happiness.” The source of this proclamation is difficult to determine, but its message echoes another noted by Marchand in a letter dated from September 1833, shortly after the rebels had fled to the protection of the citadel. Marchand wrote, “the Annamite prophets say that there will come a time when they will persecute the Religion of Jesus Christ and they will seek to destroy it, but there will rise a certain man who will embrace the Religion and reign over all in peace.” To Marchand it was clear that this “certain man” was none other than Lê Văn Khôi. Also around this time, according to Marchand other rumours, supposedly circulated by “sorcerers”, reported that he possessed special powers enabling him to evade capture. Among these included, as Marchand recounted, an ability to “walk on water, cause division, steal, make myself invisible”, and the ability

106 Marchand, AMEP 1251, 24/7/1834, pp.53-55.
107 Régéreau, AMEP 748, 1/3/1834, pp.259-60.
108 “reget in pace populum”, ibid., p.271.
to attend the court’s “secret grand council”, presumably the Cơ mật viễn.\(^{109}\) Such extraordinary prophecies and rumours hardly reflected the political realities of the situation in which Marchand was involved. Khoi never embraced Catholicism as he supposedly promised – he died in January 1834\(^{110}\) – and his allowing Catholics to rebuild Churches was hardly an altruistic concession. Instead, it is the perception of these prophecies that is of most significance. On one level, their message may have encapsulated popular hopes and anxieties in the face of momentous and potentially devastating change. On another, their doubtful authenticity strongly suggests their fabrication, by local Catholics, or by the rebels, in order to inspire mission support for the rebellion.

While the latter explanation seems most likely, the prophecies and rumours nonetheless remind us of the ways in which symbols of authority and power can be used and manipulated in unusual ways. Marchand’s last letter, written from the citadel in September 1834, exposes for us the culturally sensitive subversion of Catholicism’s in the local context.\(^{111}\) Until now, only published reproductions of this letter have been used in mission histories to either present an uncontroversial picture of the missionary or scandalise his presence.\(^{112}\) I suggest, in contrast, that Marchand’s own description of his presence offers far more valuable insights. The sanctioned version, which appeared in Louvet’s history of the Cochinchina mission (1885) and was reprinted in Taboulet’s documentary history (1955), largely reflects the content of the original, for example outlining Marchand’s dealings with Khoi and his knowledge that an envoy had been sent to Siam for military support. But it is a cut-down version, edited and sanitised to support the narrative that presented Marchand as an innocent victim.

The original, in sharp contrast, is poorly worded; it oozes Marchand’s panic in having been caught up in larger events. He begins gloomily by stating he had already sent more than ten letters to Taberd, suggesting that he had not received any news or correspondence from his confreres since the beginning of the siege a year earlier. Locked in the citadel, in his words, as a “soldier of the rebels”, he reported the presence

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\(^{110}\) Nguyên Phan Quang, Cuộc Khởi Bính Lệ Văn Khơi ở Gia Định, p.68.

\(^{111}\) Marchand, AMEP 1251, 224/7/1834, pp.53-55.

\(^{112}\) The most easily accessed reproduction appears in George Taboulet’s documentary history of the French involvement in Indochina, George Taboulet, La Geste Française, t. I, p.332, is a reproduction from Louis-Eugène Louvet, La Cochinchine Religieuse, t. II, pp.83-84.
of some three to four thousand “Bác Thuận”, i.e. northern criminals. He provides an optimistic account of his relations with the “grand mandarins”, Khôi’s officials, claiming that most had rejected “superstitious practices” and had asked to “embrace the religion”. In fact, a royal pretender in the entourage, reputed by Marchand to be a “blood relation of the king” – who he names simply as “duc ơng” (venerable sir) – had also attended a mass with the leaders. After the ceremony, the entourage bowed “six or seven times” before the altar and requested Marchand do the same.

From the flow of events recounted in the following paragraphs, we can assume that a dispute took place between the missionary and the leaders over the use and abuse of Catholic sacramental objects and religious symbols. According to Marchand, the mandarins requested to be shown how to make or copy the design of “cờ [military standards], resembling those of Constantine”. Here he seems to be referring to the Labarum monogram, the ancient Romanic symbol of the Catholic faith, which shows a letter P overlaying the letter X, and was adapted by emperor Constantine on the eve of his conversion in the fourth century. Marchand claimed he refused to offer the design and noted that it had been Phước – the priest who persuaded him to travel to Chợ Quán – who had informed the leaders of the monogram. He tells us in a jumbled manner that the officials wanted to use the design to rally “divine providence” in their favour, and threatened that if the Labarum did not work “all would turn to the disadvantage of the religion”. Marchand well understood that to the officials it was just a symbol to be employed for the rebellion’s purposes.

From this point, the narrative is increasingly erratic. Later in the text Marchand reports on a further dispute regarding the unorthodox use of his Catholic sacramental objects by the rebels. Beginning with a reference to widespread violence against Catholics, he refers back to his arrival at the citadel, noting that his Mass ornaments were confiscated from him by the rebels. Those who took these objects – it is unclear who – also “dance with the [sacramental] ornaments of his Grace [Bishop Taberd], and of M. Cuenot”. The significance is not wholly clear, but could suggest that his objects

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113 Marchand provides only the title of this figure, duc ơng or, “venerable sir”, this might be the duke Úng Hào, a member of prince Nguyễn Phúc Cạnh’s lineage.

114 He wrote: “they took me [i.e. captured me], (all very well saying ruôc [welcome]) with my breviary and my rosary, my Gospel and my Crucifix, so that I am obliged to use the ornaments of Felicity [P. Phước] to celebrate [Mass with]. In the original: “on m’a pris, (soit disant ruôc) avec mon breviaire et mon chapelet, mon evangile et mon crucifix, en sorte que je suis obligé de me servir des ornamens de la félicité pour célébrer.”
were appropriated for magical purposes. The ensemble of religious symbolism and authority he embodied probably represented one among a number of other spiritual mediators through which the rebels sought influence.

Taken along by larger events, Marchand’s symbolic, indeed ornamental, role in the rebellion had far-reaching repercussions for the mission. Marchand was not the only missionary to remain in the vicariate at this time. Throughout 1833 Jaccard continued to work under surveillance as a translator at court, Delamotte moved around clandestinely in the capital prefectures, and Bringol administered chrétiénités in the central provinces of Phú Yên and Bình Định. One other missionary, François Gagelin, remained in Bình Định province. Faced with great uncertainty, Gagelin surrendered himself to district authorities in Bong Sơn in April 1833, after hiding some months among hinterland communities in the province. Officials took the cleric to the provincial capital of Qui Nhon where he was held for several months before being moved to Huế in August. Unfortunately for Gagelin, the move coincided with the first news reaching court of the presence of a foreign missionary among Catholics in Phù An citadel. A month later, in mid-October, Gagelin became the first missionary to be executed in Vietnam in over half a century. In the end, Marchand’s presence in the Lê Văn Khởi rebellion brought the mission presence to the forefront of court attention. In the aftermath of the rebellion, not only did Marchand’s arrest by Nguyên forces in 1835 vindicate Huế’s hostility towards the mission, it was used to expand the anti-Catholic repression.

115 This “dancing” with sacramental ornaments had been reported earlier in the MEP archives in the context of persecution. It is possible the people involved were trance dancers, Nola Cooke, personal communication, Jan 2004.
117 Mission historiography claims the cleric decided to surrender after hearing that neighbouring chrétiénités had been repeatedly harassed in search of his whereabouts. It is possible that Gagelin thought that he might escape recriminations and also take pressure off local Catholics.
119 *DNTL* XIII (1833), p.55. This entry is dated September, but it is possible the court had earlier notice.
120 The *Veritable Records* note that a Tây Hoài Hoá had been travelling secretly through Quảng Ngãi, Bình Định and Quảng Yên (Phù Yên). *DNTL* XIII, 1833, p.196. The last execution of a missionary had occurred over fifty years earlier at the hands of the Tây Sơn. P. Hyacinthe Castenada, a Spanish Dominican, was decapitated in 1773, and an Italian Jesuit, Nuntius de Horta, died in prison in 1778. Under the Nguyên three missionaries died in prison between 1700 and 1701.
V. Catholicism as a Seditious Religion

Early Nguyễn edicts on Catholicism issued around the time of the rebellion reflected the development of an official view and course of action to expel the mission presence. As seen in the January 1833 edict, this view had kingdom-wide pretensions: apart from citing Dương Sơn, it also referred to Mông Phú village in Sơn Tảy province, Đông Kinh, and a third village, Nam Dương Tảy ward, Quang Tri province. The edict was enacted through the newly centralised bureaucracy, thus it requested all civil officials in each province to mobilise their subordinates, down to the lowest level of local mandarins (quận địa hạ) in the hierarchy, to order subjects known to follow the religion to publicly recant by walking over a wooden cross. Also, it presumed uniformity and integrity in its implementation. Thus the text finished by warning officials and vigilantes from using the edict as a ploy to harass obedient subjects. Yet underlying such formality, from 1834 the Nguyễn court increasingly focused on Catholicism as a culturally antithetical feature of the local landscape, viewing the religion as seditious and disruptive to social order.

One memorial, from 1833, reporting on Catholic involvement in the Lê Văn Khôi rebellion, focused on Catholic practice as a seditious threat. On two occasions, it reported, a spy (thám tử) who was also a Catholic by the name of Hồ Văn Chiến had been sent into the citadel to negotiate with Khôi to end the rebellion, and now court suspicion swirled over his activities. A pattern had appeared to develop whereby the rebels in the citadel seemed to anticipate the attacks launched by the besieging Nguyễn army. Although Minh Mạng conceded that preventing people outside the citadel from secretly providing news to those under siege would be impossible, he noted other factors endangered the situation. Drawing on rumours, Minh Mạng reported that “food pedlars selling cakes and fish meat at the market, some of whom are women who follow the religion of Jesus, secretly sprinkle poison (thuộc dộc) in [the food]”. The danger of such subtle attacks exceeded merely making royal soldiers ill and unfit to fight. Rather, the real danger lay with the effects such poison had on soldiers as loyal subjects. A more detailed explanation of this can be found in an edict issued in the aftermath of the rebellion.

\[121\textit{DNTL XI}, pp.235-36.\]
\[122\textit{DNTL XII}, p.181.\]
The theme of the powerful and seditious dangers of ingesting medicine or poison created by Catholics was elucidated in what I believe was the most important anti-Catholic edict of the period. In early 1836, the court renewed its efforts against the mission with the promulgation of a new edict by Phan Bá Đạt. In the edict, he reiterated Huế’s position on Catholicism, reporting that the dangers of the religion and its illegality had been published widely many times over, and ample opportunity had been provided for followers to recant. But the religion could not be easily defeated, he noted, because as a “perverse religion (tâ giáo) of the West it intoxicates (lạm say dâm) people’s hearts”. Of most serious concern, foreign practitioners held a sway with common subjects that threatened the very order and stability over which the dynasty reigned. Recent troubles had vindicated these concerns. Đạt cited Marchand’s (Mã Song) involvement in the Gia Định rebellion.

However, it is interesting to note that it was not the Marchand’s involvement in the leadership of the rebellion which drew the most attention from Đạt, instead it was the repertoire of Catholic rituals and practices. Marchand, he claimed, as with all missionaries and priests, preyed on the innocent and gullible. Đạt cited a particular example used widely throughout the region. When a follower was close to death, the missionary would take their eyes to grind them down with herbs to be used in special medicines (thầy thuốc nước hân). Such perverse practices commenced from the moment a subject converted to the religion, which, Đạt claimed, began with an elaborate process of deception.

Leaders of the religion [missionaries] place a man and a woman together in a house with a wall separating the two. After some time when their passions are roused, they are killed and their remains are ground together. This is dissolved in water, from which a cake is made. When missionaries travelled to spread the religion they give the cake to people to eat, and in this manner people are mesmerised (mê đạo) and can not leave [the religion].

What made Catholicism such a dangerous and insidious religion was the power missionaries and priests commanded over their followers after converts had ingested this spiritually potent matter.

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123 Phan Bá Đạt, a rising official in the Punishments Board, had also been involved in the trial of Dương Sơn village in 1831, DNTL XVII, pp.243-44.
124 Ibid.
125 It is interesting that Phan Bá Đạt cited “bệnh ho dởm”, an illness in the chest.
Phan Bá Đạt's observations on the religion arose from the court's fury in the aftermath of the Gia Định rebellion. This edict encapsulated four themes underpinning officials' views on the dangers posed by the mission and the religion. These included that the religion was an agent of rebellion and disorder with the potential and tendency to excite adherents to reject the primacy of the dynasty and the mandate of the king. Secondly, it demonstrated that Catholic ritual practice, notably the administration of the sacraments, had an essentially contaminating effect on the individual. Thirdly, it reported that behind its thin veil of religious practices, mission activity in fact promoted social depravity. And, finally, it declared that Catholic views and doctrine on social obligations, referring to the honouring of ancestors, was contrary to the Confucian orthodoxy advocated by the court. From this point the conception of Catholicism crystallised into a singular message, one that portrayed the religion as seditious.

VI. Conclusion
The rising tensions between Nguyễn rule and the MEP expansion in Cochin China highlights a critical conjunction. Firstly, the Nguyễn faced serious challenges in mastering a geographically elongated kingdom in which political regionalism and social diversity persisted and threatened to undermine Nguyễn authority. Bureaucratic reform required dramatic transformations in Nguyễn intellectual and religious life. The development from a regional power at the beginning of the century to an imperial and centralist one by the 1830s highlights Huế’s efforts to exert uniform control over the kingdom. Yet just as the defeat of regionalism required bureaucratic centralisation, Nguyễn hegemony over cultural attitudes called for strict control over ritual and intellectual life in the kingdom.

At this early stage the court viewed Catholicism as one prominent threat among a group of other interests. In the turmoil of the rebellion, local Catholics supported the rebels. Also missionaries, forced into compromising positions, became directly involved in political affairs at court and in Gia Định. Together, these issues vindicated the court's earlier actions against Dương Sơn village and elevated the prominence of Catholicism as a threat. Entrenched at the local level and presenting a competing universalist vision of the world, Catholicism appeared to Huế as a direct obstacle to the Nguyễn transformation of Vietnam. Although the mission enjoyed protection under Gia Long,
Minh Mạng recognised, as the next chapter will highlight, that it posed a rival, if not in proportion certainly in kind, to the universalising ambitions of his reign.
Nguyễn perceptions of Catholicism were based largely on popular rumour and longstanding misconceptions, many of which had been generated since the first missionary arrivals in the seventeenth century. Catholicism was a “perverse” religion (tự đạo), it “mesmerised” (mê hoặc) followers and led subjects to resist royal orders to recant, itself a serious display of subversion. Also, as stated in the January 1833 edict, Catholics’ rejection of the honouring of spirits (kính thần mình) and ancestor worship (thờ tiền tổ) made it “contrary to the principal doctrine (chính đạo)”, that is court-sanctioned views on ritual practice.¹ The perception of Catholicism as a seditious religion that affected the spiritual essence of believers and wantonly spread moral depravity provided a basis on which the court could interpret Catholic behaviour. Thus, the refusal of Dương Sơn village to renounce the religion in 1832 was viewed as the result of missionary infiltration – referring to François Jaccard – and perversion of local morality and social structures.

However, the challenge of doctrinal conflict between Nguyễn orthodoxy and Catholic beliefs only partially reveals some of the issues at stake in the early 1830s. Catholicism certainly presented an alternative and dangerous religion that stood as a threat to Nguyễn dominance over the kingdom’s intellectual and ritual life. Yet the suggestion that a conflict with doctrinal beliefs underpinned Nguyễn enmity risks overemphasising the real influence of Catholics in mainstream society and also

¹ DNTL XI, p.235.
overlooks the decades of Nguyễn tolerance for the religion. Nicole-Dominique Lê’s suggestion, for example, that the mission posed a direct danger to Nguyễn rule because of its opposition to core Confucian values – notably its rejection of ancestor worship – is a far too simplistic analysis. Minh Mạng’s repression of Catholicism from the 1830s needs to be understood, as Langlet has suggested, as part of a broader effort to destroy all alternative “ideological bases of political contestation” within the kingdom.

The local Catholic Church was one relatively contained community among a number of competing religious and political interests in the 1830s. At between one to three percent of the total population, the mission presence and the slow spread of the religion posed no realistic threat to the dominance of local cultural and ritual practices. Indeed, the diversity of formal Buddhist schools in Bắc Kỳ or the variety of intercultural – Khmer, Cham and Chinese – folk-Buddhist and animist observance followed in Dàng Trong, presented a far greater array of heterodox and competing beliefs. As a political community, compared to the threat to central rule posed by Lê supporters in the north, Chinese settlers, or, in the south, Khmer and Cham, Catholics presented a relatively minimal danger to the balance of powers and regional interests. In this chapter I argue that from the mid-1830s Catholicism was conceived by the court of Minh Mạng as a unique threat that transcended other political and religious identities.

I. Nguyễn Orthodoxy: State and Society

The fervent denunciation of Catholicism from the early 1830s represented far more than an announcement of Nguyễn disapproval of a foreign religion’s doctrinal practices. It symbolised the identification of a unique threat. The portrayal of the religion as the perverse way (tả đạo), in sharp contrast to orthodoxy, provides an important clue. The Nguyễn proscription of Catholicism is best explained as a political response to the internal divisions within the kingdom at this point. The concentrated effort launched against the mission was not because the mission risked undermining the foundations of the state. Rather, the campaign was part of a concerted strategy to demonise this

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4 Contemporary estimates place the total Catholic population at around 300,000. The population of the kingdom was, following 1840s censuses of registered males, approximately 14 million, see Annex I.

5 Indeed, in 1833 the court called all Buddhist sect leaders to Huế to be registered and issued with diplomas, *DNTL* XVII, p.34. See also, Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Séc Luận* [History of Vietnamese Buddhism] (Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1994), t.II, p.309-10.
religion. To understand this process, two contemporary features deserve our attention: the creation and shaping of intellectual activity within the bureaucracy; and, in conjunction, the propagation of Nguyễn views on orthodoxy and public morality within society.

The centralisation reforms of 1832 dramatically changed the political shape of the kingdom, yet the edifice of the Nguyễn state, embodied in the uniform system of governance and ritual sites across the region, remained weak. A generation after Gia Long’s investiture, Nguyễn legitimacy was still hotly contested within Vietnam, principally by remnant Lê loyalists concentrated in the Red River delta provinces of Bắc Ký. This community, which experienced the 1802 inauguration from a substantially different position, viewed the Nguyễn as usurpers. Thus, in response to northern resentment and to balance the threat of dissidence, Huế maintained a tight control over cultural matters from the 1820s.

From this period, Minh Mạng encouraged the participation of northern literati in the civil bureaucracy. A first step came with the re-establishment of a regular triennial examination system from 1822.6 This contributed significantly to enfranchising northern elites in the reformed civil bureaucracy and although Minh Mạng’s encouragement did not produce immediate equality in representation across the kingdom, it did briefly in the 1830s even up the proportion of northern to southern-central, Dàng-Trong, appointments.7 In a number of notable cases, Minh Mạng personally sponsored the individual careers of graduates from the north and Gia Định, areas outside the Nguyễn heartland of Thanh Hóa and the central metropolitan provinces. As a result, the 1830s saw a number of northerners enjoy conspicuously prominent positions at court.8

Yet northern scholars possessed a distinct and intellectual heritage, a reality which posed particular ideological problems to the dynasty. Defined by over two centuries of localisation and political differentiation in Dàng Trong, the Nguyễn of the nineteenth century differed substantially from their more intellectually rigorous and

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conservative northern counterparts. Minh Mạng had a firm conception of governance and state ideology and an acute vision for what doctrinal and cultural material could be accommodated, as well as what should be rejected or destroyed. To allow the proliferation of scholarship by Lê supporters and potential anti-Nguyễn dissidents posed a serious danger to political stability. Scholars preparing for the triennial examinations, for example, did not study contemporary literature or historiographies. Instead, Huệ required students to refer to the relatively less controversial ancient histories and classics from the Middle Kingdom. The reason underlying this decision, as demonstrated in Langlet’s study of Nguyẽn historiography, was the pragmatic concern to circumvent intellectual dissent.

[T]he preference for Chinese books was not the result of contempt for national history, but rather due to the difficulty to evoke it without recalling that the advent of the Nguyẽn dynasty was based on a contested legitimacy. The history of China was a neutral terrain. 9

Through reference to ancient Chinese historiography and literary “clichés”, Huệ sought to avoid the threat of provoking hostilities among members of the older northern élite. Chinese historiography, literature and philosophy not only presented a vast, readily available canon of doctrine that could be adapted to contemporary governance. It was widely valued among Nguyẽn and Lê scholars. In short, it offered a platform on which “the orthodoxy of the [Nguyẽn] dynastic State could accord with aristocratic opinion” in the north. 10 These measures were intended to shape the intellectual responses of potential candidates for the mandarinate. Yet the concern for dissent accounted for only part of the tensions the Nguyẽn faced in extending its rule over the remnant Lê élite. Alone, the potential for ideological tension over the primacy of Nguyẽn orthodoxy, I suggest, presented a dangerous impasse. It is in this context that the court posed Catholicism as an expedient target.

One result of this can be seen in Nguyẽn historiography in the period. In an 1838 memorial on Nam Định, for example, Minh Mạng made retrospective claims of Catholic involvement in a rebellion in the region in the late 1820s:

9 Langlet, Historiographie d’État au Vietnam, pp.131-33, 135.
10 Ibid., p.144.
Nguyen Orthodoxy and Catholicism: The Late 1830s Repression

In Nam Định in former years, Phan Bá Vành raised chaos, many people followed, as did Catholics (tà đao gia-tố) who had been mesmerised [by the religion] for a very long time. We (trăm) were caused great concern, but now the brigands are not to be heard, the people are peaceful, and those who follow the religion of Jesus know well to turn from their wickedness to virtue (luông).  

The rebellion, which spread from Nam Định to Hải Dương protectorates and other areas of the Red River delta from 1826 to 1827, rivalled the Lê Văn Khôi rebellion in duration, and according to Shiraiishi’s study of Nam Định, involved mostly landless peasants, bandits and common criminals. Despite the large concentration of Catholics in this region, published mission sources offer no evidence of their involvement or collaboration with the rebels. In fact, in the eight entries on the insurrection in the Nguyễn Veritable Records between 1826 and 1827, neither Catholics or missionaries are referred to. While it is probable some Catholics joined the bandits it appears unlikely to have been significant enough for the court to note at the time. Yet the appearance of this accusation in 1838, two short years after Marchand’s execution, strongly suggests that the court was determined to incriminate Catholics retrospectively.

The portrayal of Catholicism as a threat, which involved linking converts and missionaries to all contemporary instances of popular revolt, became an increasingly conspicuous feature in official perspectives from the mid-1830s. In short, Catholicism came to represent a political and ideological scapegoat that transcended regional,

11 DNTL XX, p.183.
12 In 1826-1827 northern Vietnam was still governed as military protectorates under the authority of the North Citadel (Bắc Thánh) in Hà Nội.
13 Masaya Shiraiishi, “State, Villagers, and Vagabonds: Vietnamese Rural Society and the Phan Bá Văn Rebellions”, in Senri Ethnological Studies, No. 13, 1984, p.365-66. See also, DNTL, VIII (1826-1827), p.14. The uprising was first noted in the Veritable Records in early 1826, and over the course of a year court forces tracked and battled his army of supporters with little success. But by March 1827, Phan Bá Văn had been placed in check, and a siege at his base in Trà Lụ, Nam Định protectorate, led to his capture and death. Shortly after, in May 1827, an investigation into the uprising found that the effects of widespread corruption and abuses by local officials had fuelled local support for the rebels. The court immediately addressed the problem of poverty and resentment towards officialdom in the region. Families who suffered from the pillaging of the conflict were modestly compensated, and taxes and corvée labour were cancelled for many villages around Nam Định for 1828.
14 Indeed, caught in one of the rebel’s raids, the Spanish Vicar apostolic of East Tonkin, the Mgr. Fessseiten was taken prisoner, stripped naked and held for ransom before managing to escape. Eyot, APF, III (1828-1829), p.15, based on a letter dated “6 March 1826”.
15 DNTL VIII, pp. 14, 36, 138, 141, 158, 171-175, 177-178, and 180. There are three further references between 1833 and 1834, but none of these links Bá Văn with Catholicism, see DNTL, XII, p.170; XIII, p.60; and, XIV, p.206. It is likely that many Nam Định chretiens, in areas controlled by Vănh’s forces, in particular Giao Thùy district, Nam Định were raided by the rebels for provisions and material support, as it is probable that numerous disaffected peasants, troublemakers and anti-Nguyen families from Catholic communities joined the rebellion. But there is no evidence to suggest that Catholic support was sizeable or broad based.
political and cultural identities. This depiction had the greatest impact on grassroots society in the propagation of court views on education and public morality.

In his study of Minh Mạng’s centralising policies, Choi Byung Wook focuses on intellectual integration as a key feature which led to the refocus of Gia Định attitudes from regional to central.\textsuperscript{16} The success of this process depended on carefully controlled policies, prominent among which was \textit{giáo hòa}, or “education and cultivation”. The policy, which in brief entailed the promotion of education and morality instruction, was aimed at fostering a uniform cultural identity among subjects from different regions according to what the court considered to be orthodox and “cultivated”.\textsuperscript{17} More than just an abstract concept, \textit{giáo hòa} represented a civilising strategy aimed at homogenising social and cultural practice from public morals to literacy education. At an institutional level, it entailed the establishment of schools, from village to prefectural level, and was administered throughout the provinces by Court-appointed officials, most of whom were recent graduates.\textsuperscript{18} In short, \textit{giáo hòa} involved the regulation and enforcement of Huế’s vision of individual and community behaviour.

The most significant statement on \textit{giáo hòa} came in 1834, at the height of the Lê Văn Khôi rebellion, with the publication of the \textit{Ten Articles}, or moral maxims (\textit{Thành đạo Huấn dích Thập điều}). The code was the first such example for the Nguyễn dynasty and remained unsurpassed by other edicts on morality produced by later reigns. Disseminated to every village, local literati and teachers were instructed to lecture to communities regularly on the principles of the edict.\textsuperscript{19}

As a morality text the \textit{Ten Articles} engaged an array of social practices. It advanced an orthodox vision of order and harmony through obedience and self-cultivation.\textsuperscript{20} As Langlet has illustrated, orthodoxy was promoted through the use of

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p.124.
\textsuperscript{18} Choi Byung Wook, “Southern Vietnam under the reign of Minh Mạng”, see Chapter 4.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Kâm Đình Đại Nam Hội Diện Sự Lê} [The Imperial Repertoire of Institutions and Regulations, hereafter \textit{HDSL}] (Hue: NXB Thuan Hoa, 1992-93), book 100 (vol. 7), p.130-39.
\textsuperscript{20} Briefly, the first of the articles was “respect human relationships” (đơn nhân luận), which referred to the order of family hierarchy, and the correct rapport between officials and the king. The second, “guard the purity of the heart” (chính tâm thật), outlined the four virtues of humanity (nhân), duty (nghéa), propriety (lề), and wisdom (trị), and advocated social harmony through self-cultivation. Diligence in ones labours was the underlying theme of the third article, “be devoted to your vocation” (vũ ban nghiệp), which also outlined social order by class, notably scholar (sĩ), peasant (nông), artisan (công) and merchant (thượng). The fourth, “respect frugality” (thượng tiết kiệm) encouraged thrift in financial matters, warning people from expensive ceremonies to worship spirits and the Buddha, and from smoking
metaphors from classical Chinese literature and philosophy. For example, each of the *Ten Articles* ends with a reference to a proverb from classical texts by Mencius, or Confucius. Several of the articles refer to filial piety (*hiếu*) and respect for elders (*dâi*), emphasising Confucian views on social order and obligations.  

Moreover, much of the edict, the text refers to cultural or intellectual figures from ancient China, notably Nghiêu and Thuآن (the ancient Chinese sages Yao and Shun) and Khong và Mạnh (Confucius and Mencius), giving the impression, as Langlet notes, that the “reigning dynasty was a continuation from saintly civilisations of Chinese antiquity”.  

Nonetheless, several features in the edict alert us to the contemporary social, political and religious setting. For example, the inclusion of a “soldier” vocation (*nghe nhip*) in article three provides a striking view of Nguyn perceptions of social hierarchy. This local alteration, a noticeable divergence from the classical Chinese order – “literati”, “peasant”, “artisan” and “merchant” – distinguishes Nguyn orthodoxy on order and obligation. It is striking when in article seven Minh Mng listed soldiers before peasants, in this hierarchy.

Apart from persistent reference to the value of orthodox Confucian studies, the articles also warned subjects in their religious observance. As observed by Langlet, subjects were warned in article four, which encouraged frugality, not to overindulge in expensive Buddhist ceremonies. However, Buddhism as a heterodox practice is not denounced as a dangerous doctrine. In sharp contrast, in article seven, “revere orthodox studies” (*sung chính học*), Catholicism, “Đạo Gia-Tô”, is denounced as the “perverse religion” (*tà đạo*), as “superstitious” (*di đoan*) and without reason (*vó lý*). However, it is not the specifics of Catholic doctrine that is the target of this article, and

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22 Ibid.  
23 Other articles, notably number five and number ten, also proclaim this order, addressing subjects in the succession of “literati, the educated (*thuát*), the military (*quân*), and all people (*nhan các người*).  
(According to the modern quoc ng translation)  
herein lies a critical clue to understanding Nguyễn enmity. The spread of an illicit doctrine, not ritual observance, was the ultimate purpose of the article and, I believe, the greatest issue at stake for the court in this period.

Article seven begins by emphasising the importance of Confucian studies. The teachings of the ancient sages – Nghĩa and Thuận, and of Khổng and Mạnh – are praised as “orthodox studies” (chính học), in contrast with the “perverse religion” and superstition which “deceive and seduce” (lừa đổ cảm dỗ). It then cites the “religion of Jesus” as being “the most irrational” of these practices. Men and women who followed the religion committed wrong deeds, and followers, it added, were responsible for the “disintegration of social order, [and] the deterioration of cultivation (giáo hóa)”.

The message of this attack, however, centres on the responsibility of teaching doctrine. The article continues: “among the people, not a single person should not study, and not a single day [should be] without learning.” But only students of “verse, literature and letters” (thi, thư, tr), the edict dictated, understood “righteousness and lawfulness” (nghiệt lý): “as for soldiers, peasants [and] artisans, it is not that they need to study and be literate”. However, the context of the passage demonstrates that Minh Mạng was concerned not so much for who had access to education, as Woodside suggested, but who was entrusted with teaching. Scholars of literary traditions and philosophy who conformed with the court’s views on morality and social order, and not missionaries – teachers of the “perverse religion” – held this authority.

-viewed against the backdrop of the challenge to project Nguyễn primacy, the demonisation of Catholicism was one aspect of a wider imperative to control intellectual life in the kingdom. Faced with multiple challengers to its mandate, the Nguyễn had to treat internal enemies carefully. While the remnant Lê/Trịnh supporters in the north still posed a significant threat to political stability, to wage open warfare against this community would have inevitably led to the collapse of Huế’s rule over Bắc K𝐲. In this context, Catholicism, viewed by members of court as an introduced and externally sponsored religion, presented a convenient enemy.

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25 DNTL XV, pp.9-10.
26 Ibid. The sentence begins with “hả”, which can be translated as “not at all”. I would like to thank Dr. Li Tana for clarifying this translation, personal communication, 23 February 2004.
II. The Anti-Catholic Campaign

Referred to in mission historiography as the beginning of the “great persecution”, the 1836 to 1841 period saw an intense repression of Catholicism throughout the kingdom. In this short period, according to Vatican archival records, over one hundred and thirty priests and mandarins were executed. The number of converts, however, was almost certainly much higher. Despite the violent reprisals, the high number of public executions and the intensity of the village searches throughout the kingdom, the repression had only limited success. Although the court sought to capitalise on Marchand’s execution to stir action throughout the bureaucracy, the next arrest of a missionary did not occur until September 1837, two years later. Indeed, in the meantime the mission enjoyed a steady rise in arrivals with at least five French missionaries entering the kingdom via the Tonkin mission. A number of high-profile arrests of missionaries in 1838 may suggest the campaign was highly effective, but two of these missionaries, Spanish Dominicans Ignatious Delagado and Dominic Henares, were septuagenarians and had been in the region for nearly four decades. Their capture represented little more than the easy-pickings of a concentrated campaign of house-to-house searches in Nam Định and Hưng Yên provinces. Far from heralding the precipitous conclusion to mission activity in Vietnam, the late 1830s repression weakened the missionary presence but in the end it perversely contributed to the consolidation of the mission in the kingdom.

The campaign against the mission had been underway in the north since early 1833. Prefectural and district officials had randomly set up blockades around some

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28 While figures for Europeans executed are well recorded, the numbers of Vietnamese are less well known. A contemporary source which offers a fairly comprehensive table of executions is De Montézon and Estêve, *Mission de la Cochinchine et du Tonkin* (Paris: Charles Douniol, 1858), 404-07.
30 Five of these were destined for the vicariate of Cochinchina: Cuenot, Vialle, Candalh, Jeanne and Lefèvre. Two priests, Simonin and Gauthier remained in West Tonkin vicariate. I do not have figures for how many Dominican priests may have entered during this period. The first missionary to be captured was Jean-Charles Cornay, who was arrested only after after a pirate denounced the village harbouring him in Sơn Tây province, see *DNTL XIX*, pp.224-25; *APF XI* (1838-39), pp.224-61; Adrien Launay, *Histoire générale des Missions Étrangères*, (Paris: Téqui, 1894), pp.64-65.
31 In mid-1835, Vialle and Cuenot arrived in the north from Macao. Three new clergy, Pierre Jeanne, Dominque Lefèvre, and Jean-Jacques Candalh, followed in early 1836. Taber's inability to return elevated Cuenot to the position of Coadjutor of the vicariate, the titular assistant to the Vicar Apostolic. Cuenot was anointed the Bishop of Metelopolis by Taber on 5 May 1835, in Singapore before his departure.
chrétientés to undertake searches and force villagers to recant and to reveal the whereabouts of missionaries.\textsuperscript{33} Before 1836 village heads were required to submit statements to local mandarins, usually at canton or district level, reporting that local Catholics had publicly recanted. The process was usually negotiated between a visiting official and the local village head.\textsuperscript{34} After 1836, testing increased in frequency and severity. A visiting official could force all villagers to line up and one-by-one walk over a cross and if the community was suspected of harbouring a missionary, militia blocked off village gates to perform a rigorous search.\textsuperscript{35} The capture of a missionary, or even the discovery of religious objects, a cross or a medal, implicated the whole community and brought punitive measures.\textsuperscript{36} But despite the court’s knowledge of the location of Catholic villages, and concentrations of communities – particularly in Nam Đinh and around Huế – the campaign was inconsistent in its early stages.

Pierre Jeanne, for example, who disembarked in East Tonkin in early 1836, claimed the local mandarin of Kê Đài in Nam Đinh province was notified of his arrival but had simply neglected to act to arrest him. A canton or district official, on the other hand, did take interest and to avoid further suspicion a “bought deception”\textsuperscript{37}, a bribe, was used to resolve the matter.\textsuperscript{38} “For some ligatures [of copper cash]”, Jeanne noted, “the pagans are not greedy and are forthcoming with their lies.”\textsuperscript{39} Like many of his colleagues, Jeanne avoided arrest and the village that helped him was spared from a search. For many other chrétientés, similar arrangements between village heads and local mandarins were common.

The negotiation of safety from the threat of punishment, through bribery and extortion, underscored arrangements between locals and officials. Arriving in Tonkin in mid-1836, Jean Candalh summed up the situation:

If the mandarins wanted to capture us they would succeed, but they receive no profit at all, and they would lose their lives for not having arrested us at our arrival. They search above all for local priests of the country, and allow themselves to be given money to release them. You already have knowledge of

\textsuperscript{33} See Retord letter extract 15 April 1836, in \textit{APF} X (1837-38), pp.294-99.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Cuenot, \textit{AMEP} 748 27/6/1838, pp. 883-85; Jeanne, \textit{AMEP} 748 11/7/1838, pp.897-98.
\textsuperscript{36} Jeanne, \textit{AMEP} 748, pp.609-11.
\textsuperscript{37} “\textit{un mensonge acheté}”.
\textsuperscript{38} Jeanne, \textit{AMEP} 748 6/2/1836, pp.551-54.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
the last edict that condemns to death all European missionaries that are arrested as well as the mandarins of the province where they are captured or disembark. It is this clause that saves us, the good Lord allowed Minh Mạng to add this impolitic clause.40

The claim that provincial mandarins faced execution was probably an exaggeration, but the disincentive to arrest and report was clear, after all, a moderate but valued trade in silver could be earned.

At the arrival of Chinese junks carrying missionaries to Tonkin, local assistance was crucial. Families and whole villages risked great misfortune if found harbouring missionaries.41 As Jeanne noted, "Christians are very timid and not without reason, because it [will mean] their life if a missionary is captured in their house". Consequently, most only hesitantly offered help.42 But many locals continued to act as guides helping missionaries travel through the provinces, often providing shelter in their homes. This support would not have been possible without a level of complicity among low-level mandarins, many of whom appear to have been reluctant to fully implement the proscription.

In a subsistence economy where personal or family wealth was seriously limited and often measured in field ownership, the threat of punishment at the hands of an overbearing district magistrate - whether for a criminal offence or failure to comply with bureaucratic measures - could have devastating consequences for several generations. But despite the imbalance, it was in the interests of officials and village notables to maintain harmony in their jurisdictions and most genuinely aimed to do so through appropriate use of force. In the end, however, such efforts depended on the circumstances on the ground and the subjective view of the mandarin. In the north, the impasse afforded the mission a relatively high degree of protection for an extended period. Thus, between 1835 and 1837 some seven MEP missionaries entered Vietnam via the Red River delta provinces, later dispersing to other regions of Vietnam.43

However, the mission's good fortune was not destined to last and in June 1837, disaster eventually struck. According to Retord, based in West Tonkin, a local pirate

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40 Candalh, *AMEP* 748 15/7/1836, p.644.
42 Jeanne, *AMEP* 748, Early 1836, pp.609-11.
43 Five of these were destined for the vicariate of Cochinchina: Cuenot, Vialle, Candalh, Jeanne and Lefèvre. Two priests, Simonin and Gauthier remained in West Tonkin vicariate. I do not have figures for how many Dominican priests may have entered during this period.
chased to the chrétienté of “Bau-nô” decided to take revenge on the village by denouncing the presence of a foreigner, Jean Cornay, to local officials. Interestingly, his complaint was initially ignored, but he managed to gain the attention of Sơn Tây’s Governor-general by reporting that the village was planning an insurrection. The provincial office responded immediately, assembling a small army to search the village and shortly after Cornay was captured. The Nguyễn chronicles confirm the story, noting Cornay, “Cao Lạng Nĩ”, arrested in Phủ Ninh district, Sơn Tây, stood accused of colluding with rebels. It also levelled the extraordinary claim that the missionary had “pronounced himself general of the agitators”. After interrogation he was sentenced to death by slicing. In a twist perhaps reflecting local official sentiment against such extreme measures, the supervising mandarin altered the sentence at the last minute and Cornay was instead decapitated, after which his body was dismembered. From this point, in late 1837, the repression of Catholics intensified.

The Nguyễn dynastic records show that by this point the court had become frustrated with the lack of action of officials in distant provinces. As the court came to realise what was happening on the ground, however, it applied greater pressure through the bureaucracy, especially on senior provincial officials. In 1838, mission fortunes turned from bad to worse after a Chinese junk sailing from Macao with supplies and correspondence for the Tonkin missions came under attack from pirates. According to Delamotte, the ship was seen travelling without sails – apparently a result of the attack – and eventually wrecked, scattering debris up and down the coastline. Local Catholics tried to salvage the numerous objects, including religious ornaments, communion wine and flour, but their efforts failed and a bundle of letters fell into the hands of local officials. According to Père Andre, a local priest in the Cochinchina mission, the

44 Adrien Launay, *Histoire Générale des Missions Étrangères*, t. III, p.31. Cornay was arrested in “Bau-nô” village in Hưng Hóa province, neighbouring Hà Nội.
46 The execution took place on September 20, 1837; Marette, *APF XI*, (1838-39), pp.256-58.
47 In December 1837, two local priests from Tonkin, Gregorius Đức and Joannes Trung, reported a ship carrying goods and several clergy from Macao fell prey to pirates, leading to the loss of all on board. Gregorius Đức and Joannes Trung, *AMEP* 748, 16/12/1837 pp.785-86.
48 Delamotte, letter extract dated 3 January 1839, in *APF XI* (1838-39), p.564. Several letters from 1838 and 1839 report a shipwreck and letters falling into the hands of mandarins. The capture followed a three year period in which, as Delomote explained in 1839, “shipwreck, pirates, thieves and Annamite henchmen” had prevented any letters or goods from being carried to the mission. The shipwreck referred to by Delamotte appears to be the same event reported by two local priests, Gregorius Đức and Joannes Trung, in their December 1837 letter. The debris included “European” effects such as “books, pictures, crucifixes, medals, rosary beads” and other items.
Nguyen Orthodoxy and Catholicism: The Late 1830s Repression

Governor of Nam Định reported the letters to Huế, but a significant time elapsed between the retrieval of the letters, December 1837 or January 1838, and the initiation of searches in Nam Định’s Christian villages in the following June and July. “Ông nam”, an informant, offered an explanation.49 Following the retrieval of the letters in Nam Định, the Governor conferred with his two deputies on whether to undertake searches. One of the deputies allegedly “kept his silence” at the suggestion, while the other noted that the searches might “expose them as being at fault” for not preventing the arrival of missionaries. Contrary to orders from Huế, the Governor-general waited to see how the matter would unfold.50

The neglect of Nam Định’s provincial executive is corroborated by a May 183851 memorial which recorded the severe reprimanding of Governor-general Trịnh Quang Khanh and the Governor (chief prefect: tuấn phủ)52 of neighbouring Hưng Yên, Hà Thúc Lương. The censure referred to the failure of these officials to capture foreign missionaries known to be hiding in chrétientés in the coastal provinces. As punishment Khanh was reduced to the lowly grade of level eight (tam phẩm), effectively outside the functioning bureaucratic hierarchy, and demoted to the post of Governor (tuấn phủ).53 Thúc Lương suffered a reduction to the fourth grade (tiếu phẩm) and was posted as a granary supervisor (chức lương dao) in Bác Ninh province. Lê Văn Đức, the Sơn Tây Governor responsible for the arrest of Cornay in late 1837, replaced Quang Khanh, and Doãn Uân, a senior official in the Board of Punishments, replaced Thúc Lương.54

Governor Đức took immediate advantage of the situation by initiating a sweeping military campaign across Nam Định and Hưng Yên. Between May and July 1838 he succeeded in capturing three missionaries – Henares, Delgado and Fernandez – as well as several local priests.55 Đức, who had earlier instigated the arrest of the first missionary to be captured in this period, Jean Charles Cornay in Sơn Tây in 1837, won

49 According to Andre, Ông nam’s information derived from a private conversation with the “premier mandarin” of “Qui nhơn”, Bình Định province.
51 Minh Mạng year 19, month fourth.
52 The position of “tuấn phủ” can also be translated as “Governor”. In the metropolitan provinces neighbouring Huế, the tuấn phủ held responsibility as chief official in the province.
53 The demotion in the hierarchy was symbolic, but Quang Khanh remained effectively within the bureaucracy.
54 DNTL XX, pp. 120. Trịnh Quang Khanh’s responsibilities as Governor-general (tổng đốc) covered the neighbouring province of Hưng Yên. Similarly, as Chief prefect of Hưng Yên, Hà Thúc Lương was a member of Quang Khanh’s executive.
55 DNTL XX, p. 119-22 and 143-44.
high acclaim at court for these arrests. While other factors undoubtedly contributed to his rise at this point, it seems highly likely that a number of promotions and appointments were directly linked to his successful campaign. In late 1838 and early 1839, Đức gained the prestigious promotion to minister of the board of Works and board of Appointments (Thường Thuコーティビル, Lai bộ), a position at the Academy for the royal family (Quốc tư giám), and elevation to the court Secret Council (Co mặt viên).56

Governor Đức was not the only party to win reward for the capture of missionaries and from this period we see the showering of local military officers, peasants and officials for their contribution. For the capture of Mgr. Ignacious Delgado in Căn Lao village, Nam Định province, for example, Lê Ngọc Thế, a military officer (quận cơ), received twenty taels of silver57 (lang bạc), and was promoted one grade in the military hierarchy. His company of soldiers received thirty taels, and villagers who had alerted authorities to the cleric’s presence were rewarded with fifty.58 Around the same time, Nguyễn Liêm, acting district officer in Kim Sơn, Ninh-Binh province, captured Joseph Fernandez, and a local priest, Nguyễn Bá Tuấn. Generous rewards followed. Nguyễn Liêm was promoted from temporary to permanent district magistrate (tri huyện). Provincial officials involved in the arrests, Bùi Mậu Tiến and Trần Văn Trùng were advanced one grade in the civil hierarchy.59 The peasants who denounced the two clerics received 100 taels of silver between them, and a district clerk (nha lại) received 50 ligatures (quan60) of copper cash.61 Less than a month later, in early June, Lê Văn Dũng, a military officer, arrested Mgr. Dominique Henares (Du-minh-cô) at Hà

56 Liệt Truyện III, p.358.
57 1 tael was equal to approximately 33 grams.
58 DNTL XX, pp.121-22.
59 DNTL XX, p.73.
60 One “quan” or ligature held 60 pieces of copper cash.
61 DNTL XX, pp.143-44. Other rewards noted in the Veritable Records include Hà Thúc Lương, the disgraced Hưng Yên Chief prefect demoted with Trịnh Quang Khánh in January, who revived his career in July 1838 by orchestrating the capture of a priest, Đặng Đình Viễn, after a search through Yên Dũng district, Bạc Ninh province. His soldiers received 400 quan, and Thúc Lương returned to his post as Governor (tưn phủ) in Hưng Yên. A year later, in 1839, Trịnh Quang Khánh rescued his career with the capture of two priests, Đinh Việt Du and Nguyễn Văn Xuyên. He received a reward of 600 quan, in 1839, DNTL XXI, p.221. And, in late 1840, Tạ Đức Thịnh, a priest from Hà Nội, was captured in Nam Định for a reward of 200 quan DNTL XXII, p.274. Mission correspondence records the capture and execution of many more, including priests, foreign missionaries and villagers. Cuenot wrote in a letter, for example, that he was aware of some sixteen “martyrs” in Cochinchina in 1838, contributing to a total of twenty-two for the three vicariates for the year, Cuenot, AMEP 748 6/5/1839, pp.1196-203.
Lan village also in Giao Thùy district. The villagers who denounced his presence received seventy tales of silver, and the soldiers received thirty. Elsewhere at this time, Hà Thúc Luông, the disgraced Chief prefect of Hùng Yên revived his career in July 1838 by orchestrating the capture of a priest, Đặng Định Viên, after a search through Yên Dung district, Bắc Ninh province. His soldiers received 400 quan, and Thúc Luông returned to his post as Governor (tuấn phủ) in Hùng Yên. A year later, in 1839, Trịnh Quang Khanh also rescued his career with the capture of two priests, Đinh Việt Dư and Nguyễn Văn Xuyên. He received a reward of 600 quan.

By contemporary standards, in an agrarian economy where commoners would have rarely come into contact with silver as a currency let alone such impressive sums, even the smallest of these rewards represented a fortune. For example, Lê Ngọc Thế, as an officer (Quan cơ) would have received an annual salary of around 120 ligatures of cash. This would have exchanged at two and a half taels or around 96 grams of silver. His one-off reward of twenty taels exceeded the annual salary of the highest paid officials at court, Minh Mạng’s closest advisors who received the equivalent of around 15 taels of silver. At the bottom of the hierarchy, the reward of 50 ligatures received by the district clerk involved in denouncing Fernandez should not be underestimated. This clerk probably held a position without an official salary, but his reward, which equalled the annual salary of a district magistrate, represented a considerable windfall.

However, we need to be careful not to simply assume that such prominent and repetitive references to captures, rewards and promotions indicated the success of the

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62 DNTL XX, p.171.
63 DNTL XXI, p.221.
64 I take Ngọc Thế’s rank of “Quận cơ” as being at 4a (chính tư phán) in the Nguyễn bureaucracy. Before the salary reforms of 1840, an officer of this rank received annually 60 ligatures of cash (quan tiền) and 60 measures of rice (phương gạo). A measure of rice equalled a ligature of cash.
65 For this exchange I use two mission sources. The first from 1830 states 1 bar silver = 14 Sp. Piastres = 72-75 francs, I assume “1 bar of silver” equalled a one ounce tael, see Havard, APF V (1830), p.345. In 1849, Cuenot cited “30 bars of silver” equalled “(around 2500 fr.)”, thus 1 silver = 83 francs. Again I assume “1 bar of silver” equalled a one ounce tael, see Cuenot, AMEP 750, 21/2/1849, no. 40. From these two sources I estimate the exchange for the mid-1840s at approximately 1 tael = 80 francs = 45 ligatures (quan) of cash.
66 Advisors of the civil rank of “Chinh nhât”, who received annually 600 cash ligatures and 600 measures of rice.
anti-Catholic campaign. In late August 1838, despite the success in arresting Henares, Delgado and Fernandez, Lê Văn Đức, the Governor-general of Nam Định and Hưng Yên, submitted a memorial reporting on a wide investigation within his jurisdiction. He found the efforts of local officials seriously lacking and a number were punished for their neglect.\textsuperscript{68} In mid-1839, Minh Mạng called Đặng Văn Thiêm, the Governor-general of Hà Nội-Bắc Ninh, to the capital where he was scrutinised on his progress. In a royal audience, Minh Mạng inquired: “Have followers of the religion of Gia-Tô in Bắc kỵ reformed and renounced the religion?”, to which Văn Thiêm could only meekly respond that people had followed the religion a long time, thus results could only succeed gradually.\textsuperscript{69} A month later, frustrated that a missionary by the name of “Dé-du-Ny-mô” had evaded capture so long, Minh Mạng suspected collusion between Catholics and officials. After all, he railed, how could people mistake the appearance of foreigners, with their “high noses and bushy beards”?\textsuperscript{70} He ordered provincial executives throughout the north to secretly organise for either a younger family member or employee to go disguised as Catholics and travel from village to village to search for Dé-du-Ny-mô and spy on local offices. Negligent officials were to be given no quarter if found aiding and abetting.\textsuperscript{71}

The use of family and employees to spy on low-level mandarins demonstrated the court’s frustration at the limited success of the campaign. Significantly, it exposes the court’s acknowledgment of a gulf in centre-periphery relations at the time. Huế’s open suspicion of inaction in the districts demonstrated the deep concern over irregularities in the exercise of bureaucratic authority. Loyal and dutiful mandarins such as Lê Văn Đức and Đặng Văn Thiêm were instrumental in having moved sub-prefectural offices to action. And large rewards provided financial incentive beyond the dreams of ordinary officials, peasants, soldiers and military officers. However, for the circulation of spies to have been ordered suggests serious inconsistencies at the lowest level of the bureaucracy. Indeed, this order represented an admission that the implementation of court edicts at the periphery of central rule, in districts and villages, still depended wholly on the compliance of low-level officials.

\textsuperscript{68} DNTL XX, p.182.
\textsuperscript{69} DNTL XXI, pp.117-18.
\textsuperscript{70} DNTL XXI, pp.124-26.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
Nguyen Orthodoxy and Catholicism: The Late 1830s Repression

III. Promotions and Demotions: Catholic Repression in Court Context

While the successes in Nam Định and Hưng Yên of mid-1838 thrust men like Lê Văn Đức and Đặng Văn Thiểm to unrivalled prominence in court circles, failure to act, as seen in the case of Trịnh Quang Khanh and Hà Thúc Lương, could lead to a swift fall from grace. The vast disparity in the treatment of these officials, while underscoring the significance of the anti-Catholic campaign, conceals possible tensions within the bureaucracy. By linking financial incentive and career advance to the capture of missionaries the court inadvertently stimulated a culture of rivalry and competition with dangerous implications for bureaucratic integrity. A series of arrests around Huế, also in July and August 1838, draw attention to these dangers.

The ambiguity in promotions and punishment of officials responsible for the execution of François Jaccard in September 1838 – an event noticeably absent from the Veritable Records – lays bare for us a number of issues. Held under detention as a translator since the early 1830s, François Jaccard was perhaps the court’s most important prisoner. Although the extent of his role remains unclear, Jaccard himself reported that despite his harsh treatment, he still played a key role in furnishing the court with translations of foreign language material filtering into the country from abroad. Also, he was charged with teaching “European letters” to specially selected students from court.72 Languishing in prison since 1832, he had been moved from one frontier post, in Ai Lao to another in Cam Lộ in Quang Trị prefecture. Although under close surveillance, officials suspected that Jaccard maintained strong contacts with Catholics in the region and thus moved to end his influence.

In early 1838, after suspicious officials in Quang Trị and Quang Binh provinces linked Jaccard to continued mission activity near Huế an investigation was launched by a chief censor at court, Bùi Quỹ. A native of Hưng Yên province, north of the Red River delta, Bùi Quỹ had received the doctoral title in 1829, and beginning his service as a prefect (tri phủ)73 rose swiftly through the bureaucracy to reach an executive posting in a capital province, and a senior position on a Board by 1837. Quỹ’s swift rise was typical of Minh Mạng’s encouragement of such educated officials through his personal involvement in appointments. In later decades, Quỹ had further direct dealings with

73 Triển Phong prefecture.
Catholics, showing considerable moderation at the height of the Franco-Spanish invasion in 1858 and 1859. But on this occasion, his involvement in Jaccard’s execution nearly ended his career.

Arriving at Cam Lộ on 7 March, Quý briefly interrogated the missionary. Jaccard provided a rough transcript of the interview in a letter dated March 18. He noted that before Quý arrived, he had received numerous visits from “literati-doctors” attempting to determine his contact with local clergy hiding in the provinces. Bùi Quý’s task was to settle the matter once and for all. In the interrogation he demanded the missionary declare his outside communications and contacts. Mindful of the safety of others, Jaccard denied any contact. Frustrated, Quý demanded the cleric renounce the religion, to which the priest declared his willingness to suffer execution instead. According to Jaccard, his brashness and lack of deference visibly offended and angered the official. A report of the interrogation was sent to Huế the next day, on March 9. Several days later a messenger arrived with orders to place Jaccard under even stricter surveillance. Unsatisfied with the inquiries, however, provincial authorities in Quảng Trị and Quảng Bình launched a campaign of searches through the region. From early May to late July, a small army of soldiers, elephants and horses headed by Quảng Trị’s financial administrator (bố chính), Trần Hiền Doãn, swept through the these provinces, making a series of arrests.

For details at the time of the searches in May and June we are fortunate to have a series of documents from the Board of Punishments (Hình bố) outlining the trials and sentencing of Jaccard and several local Catholics. The five documents, titled generally the “Official Papers of the Judgement of Jaccard”, range from a tribunal decree dated mid-June 1838, to the final sentence – dated early September 1838 – ordering the executions. Remarkably, the documents were obtained through the stealthy efforts of Simon Hòa, an elderly Catholic from Như Lý chrétienté in Quảng Trị, who paid a prefectoral scribe to copy the official papers. This dangerous task, which could have

74 Jaccard, AMEP 748, 18/3/1838, pp. 809-11.
75 Candalh, AMEP 748, 29/4/1838 pp.833-34.
77 Dated 21th day, 4th month of Minh Mang 19.
78 Dated 29th day, 7th month.
79 “Pièces Officielles du Procès, et Jugement de M. Jaccard, martyrise en Cochinchine le 21obre 1838”, in AMEP 748, pp. 911-40. According to a The documents were translated into French by Delamotte and a local assistant based in the Thừa Thiên chrétienté of Như Lý.
resulted in serious punishment for the scribe, took months to complete, because, according to Hòa, the scribes were so fearful that they “only dared to write two or three lines per day.”

Firstly, the documents shed light on the official searches, and offer clues on how the confusion surrounding Jaccard’s incrimination landed officials in hot water. Apart from the arrests, the official searches in Đô Loan and another neighbouring chrétienté, Yên Ninh, yielded numerous objects, including a crucifix, “a picture, a piece of paper on which was written European letters,” as well as books and other foreign objects. According to the notes, these objects were all evidence of Jaccard’s continued involvement in the mission’s activities in the region. Further interrogations were ordered in late June and early July.

Confessions by two elderly men Văn Bao, and Hữu Sách, both natives of Đô Loan village, added to official suspicions. Undoubtedly under duress, these two Catholics revealed that a local priest, “Chiêu”, had visited the village in March with a foreign leader of the religion known widely by the name of “Cao”. According to the documents, Văn Bao revealed to officials – probably under torture – that Chiêu had also visited Jaccard at Cam Lộ on several occasions, each time secretly smuggling in books. For the provincial executives involved in the investigation, such revelations confirmed beyond a doubt that Jaccard had an active role in the operation of the mission.

The searches also led to the capture of another missionary, who the court identified as “Cao”, in August in the town of Bổ Trạch, in neighbouring Quảng Bình province. This missionary is identified in the chronicles as Borie-Dumoulin (“Bổ-di-dumô-linh”), who was captured with two priests Vũ Đăng Khoa and Nguyễn Điểm.

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81 I date the interrogation at around June or July, after the first searches uncovered books and objects, and the interrogations of locals. See “Pieces Officielles, 9th day, 6th month” (late July), pp.932-35.
82 Born in the Canh Tý, 1780, he was 59 in 1838.
83 Born in year Ất Mùi, 1774, 64 years old. Unfortunately no other biographic details are available on these two men.
84 “Pièces Officielles”, pp.915-16. The “Pièces” are inconsistent with the correct dialectics for these names. I therefore refer to these figures according to how their names appear in the French documents.
85 “Pièces Officielles”, p.933.
86 According to the detailed notes attached to the documents, pp.936-40.
87 The town’s name was changed from Bổ Chinh in 1831.
88 Ibid.; see also DNTL XX, p.163.
Deceived by local captives, a not uncommon occurrence in such situations, officials mistakenly thought Borie-Dumoulin was the same missionary who had frequented Di Loan on several occasions. It was in fact Candalh who had visited Di Loan; he had fled to the hills in the west of the province prior to the searches, and died of starvation there several weeks later.\(^89\) All the same, executions followed the judgments of these captives in September and November. A number of Catholics, including Văn Bao and Hưu Sách, and Père Trần Thiện were executed by strangulation on September 21 1838. Borie-Dumoulin, Vũ Đăng Khoa and Nguyễn Diệm were decapitated over two months later, on November 24.

Also executed with this group was Jaccard. It is unclear whether Minh Mạng willed Jaccard’s execution in late 1838, or whether his sentencing was the result of a miscommunication within the board of Punishments, but it is almost certain that the decision was viewed as a serious mistake. His execution was unnecessary and effectively reduced the court’s capacity to keep abreast of activities in the region, particularly the escalation of conflict between the Middle Kingdom and Britain. From the documents we can briefly follow the fortunes of a number of officials close to the court, at a number of levels. Below the provincial executive, lesser officials suffered penalties on par with the captured Catholics. In Quảng Bình province, the district mandarin\(^90\) of Minh Tịnh, Trần Văn Chu, and a canton chief (tông mục), Nguyễn Tất Diệu, were both sentenced to 100 blows of the rod each. They were removed from their duties, and ordered to hand in their academic diplomas. The prefect of Triệu Phong, Nguyễn Quang, also found guilty of negligence, was sentenced to 90 blows of the rod, and reduced three grades in office, but he managed to hold onto his post.\(^91\) The fate of those at the executive levels was more complicated, however.

The censure of senior officials involved lies just beyond the scope of the translated official judgments, but the sequence of promotions, demotions and punishments meted shortly after Jaccard’s execution strongly suggest serious problems. Trần Hiền Doãn, above all, appears to have suffered the worst fate of all mandarins involved. In its first judgment, made in June 1838, the Board of Punishments tribunal – composed of Nguyễn Công Hoan, Lê Đăng Đoan, and Bù Quy – commended Doãn

\(^{90}\) The translation uses the term “Baillage” which I translate as “district”, or “bailliwick”.  
\(^{91}\) “Official Pieces”, p.922.
for his efforts in launching the searches and netting the missionaries and priests. They exonerated him for not making the arrests earlier, at the first round of searches, and, according to the documents, granted him a distinguished title as a reward.\footnote{It is not possible to translate the title accurately from the source, and the matter is not recorded in the dynastic chronicles.} The promotion and his successful arrests probably should have been recorded in the dynastic chronicles, as with other successes in Nam Định in the same year. However, except for a couple of insignificant references, Trần Hiền Doàn does not appear to have enjoyed the same prominence as Lê Văn Đức, for example.\footnote{“Official Pieces”, p.927.} Initially praised for his efforts, Trần Hiền Doàn, who was responsible for the investigations in Quảng Trị and Jaccard’s sentencing, was unceremoniously dismissed from the bureaucracy in late 1838 – almost immediately after Jaccard’s execution in September.

According to the final translated document, dated September 1838, Doàn is referred to in passing as the administrator of Quảng Trị.\footnote{“Official Pieces”, p.927.} This is confirmed by a contemporary entry in the Veritable Records, which further states that Doàn had just returned from a trip to Gia Định where he had found his mother ill and needing care.\footnote{“Official Pieces”, p.911.} Then in around December, a damning entry records Doàn’s summary dismissal on the charge of having abused his position. Whilst on his visit south, it claimed, instead of caring for his mother Doàn had taken an unauthorised break from his duties and taken a wife. Furthermore, the official had also abused the high office of his position by displaying the flag of a royal official (cờ bài khám sai) at his family house, an immodest flaunting of his status. Reflecting bitterly on these actions, Minh Mạng commented that he had personally advanced Doàn from his position in a prefectural office, thinking he was of good character. But like many others who had enjoyed special promotions, Minh Mạng now saw officials like Doàn as partial to fault and “detestable”.\footnote{DNTL XX, p.254.} These comments, which only partially explain Doàn’s fall from grace, I believe suggest a disproportionate and superficial censure.

\footnote{DNTL XX, p.204.}
Bùi Quỹ shared a similar, though less dramatic fate. He escaped an ignominious dismissal, but suffered a setback to his career for several years.\textsuperscript{97} In the penultimate document, dated early September 1838\textsuperscript{98}, Quỹ is cited as having received a reduction by two grades in his position as Quang Bình administrator (bô chinh), apparently a punishment for not having seen to the capture of missionaries earlier.\textsuperscript{99} Then, at the same time as Doàn’s removal in late December, Quỹ was relieved of his duties in Quang Trị and recalled to the capital.\textsuperscript{100} Until this point he had held a dual posting as a financial administrator (bô chinh) of Quang Trị, and deputy vice-minister (thi lang) of Punishments (Hinh bô). The move signified a slight demotion from a relatively influential dual position to one under closer scrutiny at court. The setback was short-lived, but his fall from grace stands in stark contrast to the high-profile accolades bestowed on Lê Văn Đức for his efforts.\textsuperscript{101}

A report from Jeantet, an MEP missionary in Tonkin, adds further details to the recriminations at this time. Although his comments are a little vague, his notes add further weight to the suggestion that Jaccard’s execution was a grave error for those involved. First, he notes that Jaccard’s “juge” was “condemned shortly after to occupy the place of this generous martyr in the cells of Ai Lao”. This was almost certainly not Bùi Quỹ – the magistrate in charge of the trial – but instead may have been Trần Hiền Doăn. Whoever this unfortunate mandarin was, Jeantet strongly believed that such harsh treatment was a consequence of the internal recriminations.\textsuperscript{102}

Career ambitions and perhaps rivalries clouded motives surrounding the interrogation and sentencing of Jaccard. Political jostling at court and within the Board of Punishments appears to have caught up with the two prominent principal architects of Jaccard’s conviction. The endnotes attached to the “Official Pieces” claim that royal

\textsuperscript{97} According to letter from Jeantet, \textit{APF} 1841, pp.276 – another mandarin, Hà Quyen, a chief in the Royal secretariat (Nơi Cắc) died shortly after the trials, LT confirms 1840, circumstances unknown. But also notes that the other Judge official involved in the trial ended up in exile in Ai Lao – this could be either Nguyễn Huy Chuần, Hien Doan or Bui Quy.
\textsuperscript{98} 18th day 7th month, Minh Mang 19.
\textsuperscript{99} “Official Pieces”, p.911. The late September judgement noted, however, that Ngọc Quý had been capable of revealing the faults of his subordinate officials, but guilty of denying his own. He was given three months to redeem himself and capture the priest “Chieu”, who had evaded capture earlier in the year, “Official Pieces”, p.925.
\textsuperscript{100} \textit{DNTL} XX, p.254. Later in the month he was promoted a position in the Punishments cabinet, \textit{DNTL} XX, p.272.
\textsuperscript{101} \textit{DNTL} XX, p.254; \textit{LT} IV, p.102.
\textsuperscript{102} Jeantet, \textit{APF} XIII (1841), p.276.
fury at Jaccard’s conviction and execution underpinned the dramatic turn in fortunes of these officials.\textsuperscript{103} After the missionary’s execution, Huế was without a translator to assist with western documents and negotiations. The court had to increase its efforts to have talented students schooled in European languages, a task not easily achieved in the short term. The increasing presence of European warships in the region and the escalation of hostilities between Britain and China made such a task more urgent than ever. For the loss of Jaccard, it appears that Trần Hiền Đoán suffered the fall on behalf of the others over this grave misjudgement. Whether zealous, overly competitive or perhaps fearful of suffering the same humiliating treatment meted out to Trịnh Quang Khanh and Hà Thúc Lương in Nam Định-Hưng Yến, the executive officials in Quang Trị and Quảng Bình fell victim to in-court politics, and paid dearly.

At the heart of the capital, the series of promotions and demotions also suggests another emerging pattern of favour in the period, the rise at court of an exclusive anti-Catholic faction. Among this group were senior officials who had played key roles in the development of policy or been involved in the Catholic repression since at least the late 1820s. They not only included generals such as Lê Văn Dúc and Đặng Văn Thiêm, but also figures permanently at court such as Phan Bá Đạt, who composed the initial edicts proscribing the religion. The most powerful official at court from the mid-1830s, however, was Trương Dang Quê. Quê deserves attention not only for his role as a military man but the influence he held as Minh Mạng’s premier minister.

A native of Quang Ngãi, Trương Dang Quê rose to prominence in the early 1830s to have possibly the most profound influence – second only to the king – in mid-nineteenth century Huế. His career spanned three reigns, from Minh Mạng to Tự Đức in the 1860s. His first senior appointment was in the 1820s as the tutor to Minh Mạng’s eldest son, crown prince Miên Tông, the future king Thiệu Trị. He was promoted as principal tutor in late 1831, and shortly after, in late 1832, he replaced Nguyễn Dăng Hư, a figure belonging to Gia Long’s regime in the south, as minister (thượng thư) of the Board of War (Bình bộ). From this position, possibly the most highly regarded ministry of the six administrative boards, I propose he played an influential role in the appointment of other officials with successive ministers of the Board of Interior (Lai bộ), the Board responsible for validating appointments throughout the kingdom. During

\textsuperscript{103} “Official Pieces”, p.938, note 9.
the late 1830s, Quế may have been responsible for the advancement of a number of other prominent officials within the War Board, notably Lê Văn Đức, Lê Đăng Doanh and Đặng Văn Thiem, and in the Board of Punishments, Phan Bá Đạt and Doãn Uân. Interestingly, officials close to Quế were appointed to provinces of the largest concentration of Catholics. These officials, notably Lê Văn Đức and Doãn Uân, instigated the sweeping searches around Nam Định in 1838. In fact, it appears plausible that many of these officials built their careers on demonstrating military prowess in the late 1830s anti-Catholic campaign.

The anti-Catholic campaign had profound consequences for careers. On one hand, success could bring acclaim and speedy promotion through the bureaucracy. On the other, hesitation and neglect brought humiliating demotion or, for officials below the prefectural level, harsh punishment. Moreover, as the Jaccard affair demonstrates, the pressure to make arrests presented unforeseen hazards to personal advancement. Yet the most critical feature of the court campaign with the widest implications for relationships between the bureaucracy and society was the changes it brought to village-level relations between officials and communities in the negotiation of safety from violence. Although reward and promotion give the impression of spectacular success in the capture of missionaries and priests in 1838, the anti-Catholic campaign had a series of unexpected consequences.

IV. Negotiating Catholic Resistance

In 1839, an unusual case concerning two soldiers, Phạm Việt Huy and Bùi Đức Thế, both Nam Định Catholics, appears to have played a major role in further concentrating the court’s attention to destroying the Catholic presence. The case, which had an impact similar to the infamous dispute involving Dương Sơn village nearly a decade earlier, arose after the two refused to publicly recant in line with orders issued for all soldiers to demonstrate their rejection of the religion. It illustrates a number of issues pertaining to court-society relations at the height of the repression and heralds the implementation of further, highly intrusive measures at the village level.

Similar to the trials leading to the Jaccard execution in late 1838, the documents recording the trial of Phạm Việt Huy and Bùi Đức Thế were obtained by the mission
and translated into French.\(^{104}\) The most interesting document of the collection is a copy of the petition presented by Huy and Thế to the court. The petition recounts their story from the beginning. It explains that during the sweeping searches across Nam Định and Hưng Yên in 1838 the two were suspected of being Catholic and were requested to walk over a cross to recant. Their refusal met with immediate punishment and the threat of execution. Defiant in their beliefs, the two protested on the grounds that their adherence to the religion was by deed a demonstration of filial piety, noting that Catholicism was the religion of their “ancestors”.

It is worth remembering that by the 1830s, Catholicism had been practiced in the kingdom for over two centuries, or around six to eight generations. Although not made clear by either Huy and Thế, these two men may very well have been born into families of several generations of Catholic heritage. Such grounds provided a powerful defence for the refusal to recant. From their point of view, their defiance was not in complete disregard for their obligations as subjects of the dynasty. In their petition, one particular passage stands out for its elucidation of their personal convictions as Catholics and their sensitivity to their obligations as subjects.

[W]e both thought and reflected that those who are faithful subjects are also grateful children; also children who are grateful to their parents are also the faithful subjects of the King, because faithfulness and filial piety are the two fundamental principals of human society. This is why when we are in the army we must be true to our duties, and if we are at our father’s house we must always love, respect and serve our parents. When we are in the camp, then we participate in all that might be regarded as military; if we must be sent to battle against the enemy, then we must march in the front lines and fight bravely . . . But to walk over the cross, we certainly dare not obey this order.\(^{105}\)

The account continues by recounting how the prefectural mandarin adjudicating their case in Nam Định dismissed their appeals and ordered several other soldiers to physically drag the two over a cross to accomplish their apostasy. Afterwards they were released and as compensation awarded ten ligatures of copper cash each. The recompense was unwelcome and, remarkably both Huy and Thế, as they noted, decided

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\(^{104}\) The circumstances of the translation are, however, unclear. The document is titled “Placets présenté par deux soldats Chretiens au Roi Minh Mang” and contains several articles including a translation of the letter sent by Phạm Viết Huy and Bùi Đức Thế (dated Minh Mang year 20, 16\(^{th}\) day, fourth month, or late May, 1839), and the sentence edict outlining the Punishment Board’s judgement of the two (dated late June 1839), see AMEP 748, pp.1181-195.

\(^{105}\) AMEP 748, p.1182.
to appeal to higher authorities and travelled with their own funds all the way to Huế to deliver the petition personally. Unsurprisingly, their requests for mediation were not well-received by the Board of Punishments, and they were arrested and tried.

In June a sentence edict was issued to resolve not only this special request, but also to prevent the possibility of other Catholics invoking their parentage as an excuse to defy the proscription. Citing Confucius, Minh Mạng agreed that respect and honour for parent’s beliefs was essential to filial piety, and acceded that a son should follow the religion of his ancestors. However, drawing on Chu Hy, he countered: “if a religion [the way: đạo] is not contrary to the reasonable [ie. Confucian] way (đạo lý) then the people [need] not change, but if it is contrary to the reasonable way then wait for three years [after the parents death and then change].” To Minh Mạng the obligation to recant was clear; Catholicism fell into this last category and therefore warranted renunciation. Minh Mạng’s comments added further urgency, arguing that “if born to a father who works as a thief, should one let oneself be punished and beheaded too”. Catholicism, Minh Mạng continued, was beyond the pale in the morality it taught and its notions of filial piety were highly suspect:

[People still possess common sense and good instinct. However, [followers of Gia-Tô] do not consider their father as their father. They treat the Westerners [priests] as father. They do not worship their ancestors (thò tổ) as ancestors; instead they worship the religion of the West just like an ancestor. And, they do not know to honour [and] worship their spirits (thần) when [it is appropriate] to worship ancestors. How can they call this filial piety?]

The memorial finished by adding that to not leave the religion of Jesus was against the laws of the court and ordered the immediate punishment of Phạm Việt Huy and Bùi Đức Thế. Shortly after, in mid-June, the two were executed. Their bodies were severed in half in an extremely violent display and their corpses were thrown into the sea. The memorial recording the events ended rather sardonically with Minh Mạng noting that the two could hardly be seen as showing filial piety to their parents “as meat for food to fish and shrimp”.

106 Ibid., p.1191. The matter is also recorded in some detail in the Nguyễn chronicles, DNTL XXI, pp.101-02.
107 DNTL XXI, pp.101-02.
108 Ibid.
The extraordinary manner in which this case ended is testament to the high
degree of irritation it must have caused at court. The arrival of two soldiers from one
end of the kingdom to personally protest a well-established law by invoking a
compelling argument based on loyalty and filial piety undoubtedly generated serious
consternation. Similar to the case involving Dương Sơn’s Catholics nearly a decade
earlier, at stake here was the principal of obedience and the bonds of obligation linking
a subject to the king.

Coinciding with these events, in September 1839, only months after the
execution, the court issued an edict ordering the construction of a state-cult altar (*miếu
thờ Thành-hương*) in every village. The provision was part of a kingdom-wide
expansion of the Nguyễn state cult to complement the thirty-one provincial shrines (*Hội
dông miếu*) dedicated to the tutelary spirits recognized by the Nguyễn court. These
spirits, the edict recorded, “prevent misfortune” providing a crucial service to subjects
and communities; thus all villages were ordered to construct an altar to house the local
spirit recognized with a Huế issued diploma.\(^{109}\) Above all, the measure highlights the
increased penetration of Nguyễn central rule down to the lowest levels of society. In its
designs of “preventing misfortune”, it represented more an imposition of Huế-centric
order over village ritual affairs and obliged all subjects to conform to state-ordained
ritual practices.

The measure, which ostensibly does not appear related to the Catholic
repression, quite possibly came in response to Phạm Viết Huy and Bùi Đức Thể’s
petition. Although the edict does not specifically cite Catholicism, given the timing of
its promulgation and its direct impact on village religious observance, this measure, I
believe, was intended as an indirect attack on Catholic society. On one level it
complemented the culturally homogenising vision embodied within the *Ten Articles* by
adding another dimension to the demonstration of obligation to Huế. Yet the court
probably understood well that observance of state-cult and ancestor worship was
anathema to Catholic doctrine and had long been proscribed by the mission. This
measure required a compromise of beliefs that had the potential to enable officials to
distinguish compliant subjects and communities from Catholics. Thus, immediately

\(^{109}\) *MMCY* III, p.215. This type of shrine, dedicated to the spirits of “walls and moats”, essentially
represented a symbol of authority in the spiritual realm parallel to temporal bureaucratic rule, see Langlet,
*L’Ancienne Historiographie d’Etat*, p.87.
after its issue missionaries in Nam Định reported on officials of ritual ceremonies (chữ tế) being sent from village-to-village to instruct on “superstitious practices”, in other words the correct rites for the new shrines. Mgr. Retord reported in 1840 that Huế had employed masters of ceremonies (chữ tế) to be sent from village-to-village in Nam Định to instruct on “superstitious practices”, in other words the correct rites for the new shrines. Court policy called for regular checking by local mandarins that households were making the correct offerings.

Over the following decades, the construction of state-cult shrines and correct ritual observance became a major point of conflict, particularly between Catholic and non-Catholic villagers. The shrines not only required special observance but also cost villages considerable resources for their upkeep, outlays that Catholics refused to contribute to. In the short term, from the late 1830s, the implementation of such demanding pressures on religious practice at the village level, including the Catholic searches and from 1839 orders for the construction of a state-cult shrine, had a profound effect on community level behaviour. Most immediately, it fuelled uncertainty over safety from the threat of violence.

Bribery and extortion had long been a feature of relationships between local authorities and society and formed one alternative path for the resolution of village level conflicts. Pierre Duclos’ observation that “[Village] heads [are] all despots and [that] the people wail with fear before the magistrate”, highlights the commonly held view of the connection between official status and power at the local level. His further remark that “with gold bars murder and theft blossom among honest people”, not only indicates the normality of bribery as an arrangement in judicial affairs, but it underscores the negotiable nature of security in official-society relations at the middle and lowest levels of the bureaucracy. In the early stages of the Catholic repression bribery proved a highly effective means for villages to avoid complying with court edicts. But through the repression, the grounds for negotiation turned dramatically and placed communities in an increasingly compromising position. The offer of rewards, promotions – or alternatively demotions for failure to act – shifted the balance of relations between local

Retord, APF XIII (1841), pp.263-75.
Ibid.
Retord, APF XIV (1842), pp.19-37.
Marti, APF XVII (1845), pp.351-52.
Duclos, AMEP 749 12/1/1842, pp.297-300.
officials and Catholics. The imposition of new measures, notably the circulation of spies throughout the provinces, and, after 1839, the construction of state-cult shrines, in turn added new pressures.

One area where these pressures had a great impact was in the undermining of personal status. Traditionally, threat of official punishment might be mitigated through petitioning an official. Good family ties, age or personal status might serve as grounds for alleviation. However, the case of a local Catholic doctor (medicin), Simon Phan Đac Hòa, in Như Lý near Huế, draws attention to a significant and highly destabilising shift in official deference to this factor. Hòa, a doctor (medicin), was arrested with Delamotte in 1840 and eventually executed for harbouring a missionary in his village.

First, Hòa’s biography illustrates some salient features of Catholic experiences in this period. At 65 years of age (born in 1775?), Hòa was a highly distinguished member of the Catholic community around Huế. Mission reports record that he converted at a young age “with his mother and one or two of his sisters”. His father had been a “grand mandarin” but had died – during the Tây Sơn rebellion? – forcing his mother to leave Huế. With nowhere to go, the family sought refuge at Như Lý where they eventually converted. Through the mission the young Hòa received an education at the Latin collège, and was destined for a life in the priesthood. But for “different reasons”, attributed to the political upheaval in the late eighteenth century, he left his studies and “returned to the world”. Yet he continued to work for much of his life as a catechist in the surrounding villages. After the sentencing of Dương Sơn chrétienté, and the proscription edict in January 1833, he provided shelter to Delamotte.115

At the height of the anti-Catholic campaign at the end of the 1830s some of Hòa’s fellow villagers repeatedly called him to force Delamotte, whom he had been sheltering for most of the previous decade, to find refuge elsewhere. Also, pressure mounted for the construction of a state-cult shrine (miếu thờ Thánh-hoảng) in the village as per royal edict. For a short time, Simon Hòa was able to stave off the requests by browbeating fellow-villagers with “every sort of condescension”.116 But eventually, the petitioning proved simply too much and he was arrested. In 1840, he was tried and

115 Cuenot, AMEP 749, pp.873-74.
116 It is too difficult to guess from what Vietnamese term the translator interpreted “condescension”, but by the use of the French term, it appears certain Hòa had used his status to censure his fellow-villagers. Translation of the letter of the doctor Simon Hòa dated Ký họi, 9th month [1839, October], AMEP 749, pp.873-74.
sentenced to decapitation. Yet even at his execution in December the presiding official showed some deference to Hòa’s status and age by pleading with him to publicly recant to avoid the punishment; overtures which the doctor declined.\textsuperscript{117} That Hòa was able to fend off threats from low level officials and fellow villagers stands as testament to the authority his status endowed him as a respected elder and doctor. His public execution, however, must have caused serious reflection on the uncompromising brutality of Huế’s hostility. Hòa’s treatment would have deeply challenged commonly held notions of respect for status and obligation to the elderly.

Another example highlights the law and order problems arising from the anti-Catholic campaign, particularly the spread of extortion. In late 1839, at the height of the anti-Catholic campaign, Cuenot reported that four “wicked fellows” visited the large chrétienté of Phước Lâm, Quảng Ngãi province, and claiming to be on official business threatened to denounce the village. After lengthy negotiation the four extorted 130 ligatures of cash from the village heads. The news quickly reached the provincial Governor (\textit{tước phủ}) – Hồ Hữu\textsuperscript{118} – through his nephew, a Catholic. Incensed by the abuse, in particular their having claimed to be acting on the Governor’s orders, Hồ Hữu issued a warrant for their arrest. Soldiers soon after chanced upon the thieves who were caught smoking opium – obtained no doubt with their ill-gotten cash: two were subsequently executed and the others were sentenced to lengthy exile.

Several catechists from Phước Lâm visited the Governor’s office to offer gratitude for intervening on the community’s behalf. It is unclear whether they offered Hồ Hữu a gift or merely his expressed his thanks, but the response received was severe. In an indication of the increasingly hostile environment, not to mention the widespread threat of extortion by bandits and petty criminals, Governor Hồ Hữu issued a dire warning. He urged the catechists to “guard your money”,

\textit{Give it to no one, it is useless. To those among you who have decided to die for the religion, prepare yourselves. At the least leave what you have with your wives and children, instead of losing it as a gift to the mandarins. As for those who do not have the courage to die, they must conform to the orders of the king.}

\textsuperscript{117} Cuenot, \textit{AMEP} 749, pp.873-74.
\textsuperscript{118} According to dynastic records for 1838 and 1840, Hồ Hữu was Governor of Quảng Ngãi and Quảng Nam for this period \textit{DNTL} XX, p.85, 192; \textit{DNTL} XXII, p.47.
I can no longer do anything to save you: I will, however, [from now] resort to restraint.\textsuperscript{119}

Far from extending a generous hand to Catholics, the Governor had intervened out of official pragmatism. He undoubtedly saw dangerous implications for local law and order should such opportunistic banditry have been allowed to spread unchecked. All the same, as he made clear to his visitors, intervening favourably was no longer feasible.

Incidentally, Hồ Hữu was removed from office and heavily demoted less than six months later, allegedly for incompetence.\textsuperscript{120}

To focus briefly on the use of violence as a tool of persuasion, the examples of Phạm Viêt Huy and Bùi Đức Thế, and Simon Hôa strongly suggest that many officials viewed the use of violence to punish disobedient Catholics as a dangerous method. On one level, the threat of violence represented a preliminary tool of coercion, and as one Catholic observed, mandarins preferred first to “employ all kinds of torture to force” defiant Catholics to recant.\textsuperscript{121} This unusual compromise suggests that most officials recognised the potential for extreme displays to effect a favourable result. It also suggests that officials were well-aware that extreme displays could have an undesirable impact with dangerous repercussions for social order. In resorting to execution, authorities not only destroyed a life and in turn a family, they risked undermining the foundation of community relationships, notions of status, respect and obligation. Nevertheless, these examples suggest that officials more often than not sought compromise through alternative means to resolve Catholic defiance. It might be suggested that as in the case involving the bandits at Phước Lâm chrétienté, a degree of accommodation was crucial to prevent widespread destabilisation in community relations between Catholics and non-Catholics.

However, the execution of Catholics posed other dangers that officials recognised but had little control in preventing. At executions, non-Catholics and Catholics competed with each other for small samples of the victim’s blood, absorbed with a cloth, or off grass, in belief of its healing properties. Mgr. Retord’s description of onlookers descending on the victim, Cornay on this occasion, provides a colourful description of the spectacle of the public execution. After the executioners had finished

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{119} Cuenot, \textit{APF XII} (1840), pp.556-59.
\item \textsuperscript{120} \textit{DNTL} XXII, p.54.
\item \textsuperscript{121} \textit{APF} XII (1840), p.561.
\end{itemize}
Nguyen Orthodoxy and Catholicism: The Late 1830s Repression

at the scene, Retord reported, “the curious crowd” waited while several Catholics, a doctor and a military officer, wandered over to the execution site to collect the “scraps of flesh which had been scattered here and there”. A nun from a neighbouring chrétienté, ready with specially prepared cloth, also approached tentatively to soak up blood from Cornay’s clothes.

At this signal the crowd, without distinction between Christians or pagans, rushed to collect some drops of this [Cornay’s] precious blood. The nun scolded the pagans, they asked for grace to be allowed [to take some]. Shortly after they [began to] squeeze the [scraps] of flesh to extract [remaining] blood, and also scoured the surrounding earth where it had spilled in abundance.

According to Mgr. Retord, the vicar apostolic of West Tonkin, people used these samples in some cases to make special “ charms against the devil” and or to feed their sick children. Such responses, repeated throughout the kingdom at Catholic executions in the 1830s and 1840s, symbolised a dangerous subversion of official authority.

Execution, as a judicial measure, had implications not only in the temporal setting, it also had a spiritual aspect. As seen with the ceremonial execution of Joseph Marchand by dismemberment and the brutal treatment of Phạm Viết Huy and Bùi Đức Thề, the act of execution exacted punishment not only in the temporal setting, it was also intended to inflict damage on the spiritual being of the victim. While unremarkable in cases involving thieves and murderers, the execution of Catholics, especially priests and missionaries, appears to have had a profound influence on some officials. The period is replete with examples of mandarins displaying reservations about the resort to violence against Catholics for their refusal to recant, and in some cases presiding mandarins feared their role in the execution would attract the retribution of the victim’s spirit. Prior to the execution of Father Viên, a local priest in West Tonkin, for example, the mandarin loudly apologised to the victim in front of the attending crowd for the act about to be carried out.

We know that you are not deserving of death, and we would wish to have the power to save you, but the king’s orders do not permit us to do so. Pardon us

123 Ibid.
124 Ibid., see also Retord, APF XII 1840, p.523.
then, though we are obliged to take away your life, and do not impute to us this crime.\textsuperscript{125}

While the mission source focuses on the injustice of the situation, the last sentence strongly suggests that the mandarin had more pragmatic concerns on his mind. Indeed, other officials reportedly made burnt offerings at hastily erected shrines to appease the spirits of those executed to deflect any retribution. As in the case of the execution of Borie-Dumoulin, Khoa and Diệm in 1838, honoured the spirits of these victims as tutelary spirits, both for their spiritual power and for their propitiation.\textsuperscript{126}

Such responses not only demonstrate a divergence of opinion between court edict and local authority, they draw attention to major differences between official and unofficial perceptions of Catholicism. According to Catholic sources connected to the rumour mill at court, scandalous reports attributed the Minh Mạng’s untimely death in 1841 to the years of repression and execution of missionaries. One rumour suggested that the spirits of executed Catholic “Masters”, entered Minh Mạng’s body during his delirium “dealing him the blow of death”.\textsuperscript{127} Perhaps a sign of consternation in official circles, such rumours might be explained as doubts over the morality, indeed the effectiveness of the violent repression in preceding years.

V. Conclusion

More than any other ruler in the nineteenth century Minh Mạng was responsible for transforming Vietnam from a regionally oriented kingdom to a centre-focused imperial power. Bureaucratically, Minh Mạng implemented a series of reforms which enabled Huế to rule the region directly through a uniform hierarchy of civil officials. Culturally, he combined a consolidation of the system of Nguyễn ritual sites with a restriction on the activities of rival religious communities. Central to both these developments was the implementation of a wide-reaching strategy of cultivation (giáo hóa). However, the consolidation of intellectual and cultural life faced considerable challenges in the form of residual Lê supporters and the mission presence. Thus, instead of directing its

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{127} Noting these, Lefèvre reported that the king’s illness initially “had not appeared serious, [with] him experiencing only palpitations in his bowels.” But during the illness Minh Mạng had had a dream where “three barbarians or savages appeared by his left side” (Lefèvre, AMEP 749, 25/5/1841, pp.34-35).
energies towards an internal political enemy, the court focused its attention on Catholicism. The foundation of this, to prevent the spread of rival ideological systems within the kingdom, is most noticeable in the principal discussion of Nguyễn morality in the period, the Ten Articles.

In the short term the anti-Catholic campaign, which began in 1836 and lasted until Minh Mạng’s death in January 1841, led to the capture of seven missionaries and over a dozen Vietnamese priests. But the campaign had mixed success in curbing mission activities. Indeed, it had a highly disruptive impact with wide-reaching consequences for mainstream society and the bureaucracy. While the campaign led to the reward and promotion of some mandarins for their efforts in capturing missionaries in Nam Định in 1838 and 1839, negligent officials suffered demotion and humiliation. In linking anti-Catholic policy with career advancement the court inadvertently promoted a dangerous culture round of rivalries among mandarins. Apart from threatening the stability of the bureaucracy, this link, I have suggested, opened the way for an anti-Catholic faction surrounding Trương Đặng Quê to rise to prominence from this period.

Outside court, in the district and village world, the campaign had a range of repercussions, for local level officials and between communities. The court’s realisation that its edicts had had only limited effect, together with the open defiance of many local Catholics, led to the implementation of increasingly severe measures. One of the most innovative of these, I argue, was the edict ordering the construction of shrines in every village. While ostensibly a policy designed to enhance the symbolisation of central rule, it had obvious dangers for Catholics. In following decades, observance of the cult of state became a major source of tension for Catholic communities and the mission. More immediately, it gave rise to exploitation, with criminals seeking to extort cash from communities at the threat of denunciation. On another level, the court’s targeting of Catholics, regardless of age, status or vocation, initiated a fundamental shift in community attitudes.
Responding to Crisis: The 1840s Mission Reforms in Cochinchina

Minh Mạng’s death after twenty years on the throne ended one of the most intensive periods of reform and change in Vietnamese history. His reign not only led to the consolidation of central rule, but through vigorous military campaigns he extended Huế’s control over much of Cambodia and Laos to achieve the largest territory governed by a Vietnamese monarch. The accession of Thiệu Trị in 1841, however, saw the beginning of a gradual erosion of these achievements. From the outset of the reign external threats presented new dangers. In late 1841 the Nguyễn army was forced to withdraw from Cambodia, marking the commencement of a protracted frontier war that flared intermittently over the following two decades. In southern China, British attacks on Canton in 1840 over opium trade not only damaged Chinese prestige in the region, it intensified fears, especially in Huế, of further European aggression. While the pattern of external threat posed great dangers, other changes initiated by the mission at the local level set in motion a series of developments which, in the short term, led to the reshaping of Catholic Church activity in Cochinchina. This chapter examines the continuing repercussions of the Minh Mạng repression in the early years of the Thiệu Trị reign, and the major shifts brought about by mission reorganisation from 1841.

I. The Go Thi Synod: August 1841
By 1841, the Catholic repression had brought the mission to the brink of collapse. Increasingly coercive bureaucratic measures forced mission activities into secrecy and threatened to see the complete dispersal and destruction of all chrétiéntés in the
Responding to Crisis: The 1840s Mission Reforms in Cochinchina

kingdom. The intensification of court interference in village affairs, notably in the edict for the construction of state shrines (thành hoàng miếu) in villages, and the enforced regulation of village offerings, imposed new pressures and sharpened tensions in society. The repression provided new grounds for bribery and extortion among officials, practices which threatened to spiral out of control on account of the heightened greed for cash and silver to be extracted from the mission. The conditions provided fertile ground for distrust and suspicion in grassroots society.

Since the 1832 sentencing of Dương Sơn’s seventy Catholics, official searches through chrétientés, numerous executions of village heads and notables, and the exile of commoners had torn numerous chrétientés apart. The arrest of Delamotte in 1840 in Di Loan, for example, nearly led to the complete dispersal of the village. Recriminations not only led to the execution of Simon Hòa, but to the imprisonment of three notables – Philippe Phê, Pierre Duyên and Vincent Luật – and the exile of two young nuns, Maria Magdalene Hầu and Maria Vũng to military settlements, “đồn điện”, in the highlands.¹ The period also saw the revival of a measure used in earlier repressions, the facial tattooing of Catholic exiles. In the case of Antoine Nam², the magistrate of Quảng Bình suggested the characters “perverse religion” (tà đạo) be engraved on his left cheek and “Phú Yên”, the destination, on the right cheek.³ Petrus Diệu, a priest from Nam Định province confirmed the practice in a letter that detailed his sentencing as an exile.⁴

The constant threat of village searches by prefectural officials, the discovery of an object of the religion, or, at worst, the capture of a missionary or priest placed great strains on communities. Whole chrétientés faced extreme punishment if denounced by fellow non-Catholic villagers. Subsequently, for much of the 1830s local clergy had administered the Cochinchina vicariate alone while missionaries, hiding or in exile, tried to coordinate activities from their isolation. This situation, although essential to the survival of the mission, drained resources and taxed local good-will. Indeed, constant isolation presented its own dangers. Jeanne, who had spent nearly three years in hiding had spent much of the time alone in a cabin in thick jungle near Cái Mon in the Mekong

² Nguyễn Hữu Nam.
³ Nguyễn Hữu Nam was later executed on the king’s orders in 1840, “Translation of the Report made by the Criminal Mandarin of Quảng bình on Antoine Nam”[copy], AMEP 749, pp.141-43.
⁴ “Lettre de Diệu” in Quốc ngữ, AMEP 749, pp.541-42.
Responding to Crisis: The 1840s Mission Reforms in Cochin China

delta. The only missionary to travel all the way to the far south since the Lê Văn Khôi rebellion, after only two years in the south he succumbed to a serious illness which literally sent him mad. Duclos explained in January 1842 that Jeanne’s condition had been so poor that for the previous year he “sang incessantly” and had “risked compromising the whole mission”. The constant concealment of missionaries endangered good relations, the support of local Catholics could not be relied on indefinitely without recompense.

For some missionaries, the situation brought unrelenting misery. From 1833 Bringol had miraculously avoided capture by hiding like a hermit in caves in Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh. In 1841, pitifully unwell, and no longer able to hide, Bringol was captured by a group of opportunists who released him after a hefty bribe. He died at the end of the year, probably of despair and hunger just as Candalh had done in 1838 in Quang Tri. Thus, in early 1841, the mission had a nominal presence in only two points of the vicariate. Delamotte’s death in prison in October 1840 ended the mission presence in the provinces surrounding Huế and from this point the mission focused on Gò Thị, outside Qui Nhon, in Binh Dinh province. Lefèbvre, tending to Jeanne, maintained the mission presence in the far south.

The advent of the Thiệu Trị reign After the enthronement of Thiệu Trị in February 1841, missionaries waited in anticipation to see what attitude the new king would take towards the mission. Lefèbvre initially suspected that the violence would resume on account of the king’s anti-Catholic sentiments expressed before his enthronement. Rumour had it that as a crown prince he had advocated harsher measures against Catholics. Thus it was to the great surprise of many missionaries throughout the kingdom that the advent of the reign saw an immediate hold on court policies, including the Catholic repression. During this brief respite the mission endeavoured to adjust to the new conditions. The reforms which emerged from a mission council held at Gò Thị in August 1841 provided the mission with a sound basis on which to face future hostilities. It also initiated a series of changes that revolutionised mission activities.

In early 1841 news arrived in Cochin China of Mgr. Taberd’s death (September 1840) in Pondicherry, an eventuality which automatically elevated the vicariate

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5 Duclos, AMEP 749, [copy]12/01/1842, p.299.
6 After Taberd’s death on 31 July 1840, Cuenot was elevated to Vicar Apostolic.
7 Lefèbvre, AMEP 749, 25/5/1841, p.35-36.
coadjutor – a deputy position to the vicar apostolic – to the head of the local church. One of the first to return to the vicariate after 1835, Étienne Cuenot assumed Episcopal responsibilities. Cuenot’s promotion in 1841 heralded a new era for the mission. Born at the beginning of the Napoleonic era, he displayed many of the talents and attitudes of his post-Revolution generation and epitomised early nineteenth-century mission zeal and enthusiasm for Church expansion. For the following two decades, until his death in 1861, he wielded enormous authority over mission work in Vietnam. Taking advantage of the respite afforded by the inauguration of the Thiệu Trị reign, and, wasting no time in exercising his new powers, Cuenot organised for a synod to be held at Gò Thị.

Cuenot had experienced first hand many of the trials of the repression under Minh Mạng. With these experiences at the fore, he aimed at carve out a new direction for the mission, to strengthen the MEP internal governance and to enable the wider Catholic community to better deal with the hostile political environment. He understood that the violence of the previous decade had greatly reduced the mission’s capacity and resources. It now faced an important juncture that would determine its survival. Yet the mission maintained small advantages. Local priests could still travel through the vicariate, although cautiously, to administer chrétientés. Moreover, a modest network of lay leaders and couriers still enabled the dissemination of mission correspondence, communications and funds between communities. It was on the expansion of this network and the tightening of bonds between chrétientés that the mission turned to consolidate its presence.

The basis for the council was the implementation of a series of chapters propounded in 1803 at the “Synod of Sutchuen” (Szechwan) in southern China. Impressed by the resolutions reached there, the Propaganda Fide ordered in 1832 that the decisions should be applied to vicariates neighbouring China. Owing to the dangerous situation in Vietnam, however, the instructions did not reach the Cochinchina vicariate until 1839. It did arrive in the north in the mid-1830s where the respective apostolic vicars of East Tonkin, the Spanish Dominican Mgr. Delgado, and the MEP Mgr. Havard dismissed much of the council advice claiming that many of the articles,

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8 For the official mission biography see: Adrien Launay, Les 35 Vénérable Serviteurs de Dieu (Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1907). For a brief summary of his biographical data visit the “recherche” link on the MEP website: www.archives.mepasie.org
such as longer periods of instruction in Latin for local priests, had long been implemented in their vicariates.\textsuperscript{10} In contrast, Cuenot probably viewed the Szechwan document as providing a pretext to reform and remodel the structure of the Cochinchina mission. Whereas Delgado and Havard viewed the Synod recommendations as obsolete, Cuenot used them to reorganise the local clergy.\textsuperscript{11}

The synod was held in August 1841, and significantly thirteen out of the vicariate’s thirty local priests attended while only two other missionaries, Lefèbvre and Miche, travelled to the meeting.\textsuperscript{12} The invitation of such a large group of local clergy, all from different areas of the vicariate – eight from the central provinces, two from north of Huế and three from the Six Provinces – suggests a concerted attempt to enfranchise a representative delegation. Such a high attendance of the vicariate’s clergy and the three most senior missionaries at a single location bordered on folly in light of the recent years of repression. The threat of violence had subsided, but danger still lurked. If local officials had chanced upon this meeting, it would almost certainly have led to the end of the mission. Yet the benefits of the gathering were deemed to outweigh the risks. Over a week, the attendees responded to the chapters set on diverse topics, ranging from new rules for the instruction of indigenous priests to the administration of the sacraments, and the indoctrination process for neophytes. Each chapter contained a series of articles on adjustments and refinements for the implementation of new measures according to the unique social setting. For example, \textit{Chapter IV} on the Eucharist ordered that women should be made to wear a cloth over their faces. To that point women normally received the sacrament using their long hair as a veil. Orthodoxy now required more covering.\textsuperscript{13} In \textit{Chapter V}, on the conduct of the Mass, the first article forbade the ceremony to be held in the presence of carvings and pictures of the four revered animals of Vietnamese folklore culture, the dragon, lion, tortoise and eagle. These symbols were obviously still widely present in Catholic communities, in households on walls and furniture, and outdoors as statues and on tombs.\textsuperscript{14} This Chapter also reminded priests that Mass should only be conducted in dark hours, at least no

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., p.128-29.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., p.130.
\textsuperscript{12} A full list of attendees is attached to the Synod documents, “Synodus Vicariatus Cocinensis, Cambodiensis et Clampilensis habita im Provinciâ Binh Dîngh anno 1841”, AMEP 749, pp.71-99.
\textsuperscript{13} Metzler, \textit{Die Synoden in Indochina}, pp.138-39, see “Synodus Vicariatus Cocinensis”, Ibid., p.86.
\textsuperscript{14} Metzler, Ibid., p.139, Cf., “Synodus Vicariatus Cocinensis”, Ibid.
earlier than three hours before dawn, during a time of persecution, a necessity forced on the mission at the onset of the proscription.\footnote{Metzler, Ibid., p.140, Cf., “Synodus Vicariatus Cocinensis”, Ibid., p.87.}

Such measures hint at the degree of detail and rigour in discussions at the Synod. In turn, they highlight the increasingly strict discipline imposed on local Catholics under MEP governance. This was confirmed not only in the proscription of local animist symbols, but in the enforcement of puritanical views on families. The sixth chapter, on Penance, established severe restrictions regarding confessions. One article required priests to pressure adults, with the threat of withholding absolution, to ensure adherence to guidelines regarding children, notably: not allowing children to sleep in the same bed as parents, preventing boys and girls from sleeping in the same room, dressing children decently, forbidding swearing and obscene sayings, or permitting children to be around itinerants, hawkers, vendors, or in places frequented by comedians or soldiers. The chapter also held that reciting the Rosary prayer was no longer a sufficient form of penance – thus suggesting this was long the main reparation administered – and listed a series of alternatives including, visiting the sick, cutting back temporarily on smoking tobacco or chewing betel, and restricting oneself to eating only rice with salt.\footnote{Metzler, Ibid., pp.141-43, Cf., “Synodus Vicariatus Cocinensis”, Ibid., p.88-91.} The reality of the implementation of these measures may have been far different to the spirit of these guidelines, but the underlying message of doctrinal purity through social control indicates a new forcefulness.

In keeping with the more stringent guidelines laid down for converts, the council instigated a new era of discipline within Catholic communities that effectively set the Cochinchina mission on a new course. Responding to the previous decades of loose administration, hindered by MEP competition with Franciscans and the 1830s repression, Gò Thị not only called for more orthodox Catholic practices, it established a new modus operandi for the hierarchy of relationships linking missionaries to chrétientés. The most noticeable evidence of this shift can be seen with the implementation of one of the key resolutions arising from the council, more rigorous catechising of neophytes, or new believers.

One of the first matters to be discussed, the process of preparing neophytes for baptism was extended to forty days for normal cases and up to a year for the
Responding to Crisis: The 1840s Mission Reforms in Cochinchina

uneducated, mentally infirm, servants and slaves.\textsuperscript{17} The principle of this distinction was clearly to ensure that neophytes were conscious of the spiritual imperatives, and that neophytes sought instruction for the right reasons and not in order to seek mission protection, or other unorthodox benefits such as a Catholic wife, or healing. As a concession, the chapter added that it was no longer necessary for catechumens to learn by rote an endless numbers of prayers. Instead the duty fell to catechists and priests to ensure doctrinal instruction was comprehensive and focused on orthodox Catholic practice. Several letters from the early 1840s provide the first details of indoctrination from the period, highlighting an intensive and undoubtedly costly process.

Marie Fontaine, based with Cuenot at Gò Thitalic provided a detailed description of local conversion in his February 1843 report.\textsuperscript{18} As a first step, he reported, messengers went out to “pagan” villages to search for those willing to be instructed and convert. “Every day”, he wrote, “messengers returned to His Grace [Cuenot] ... to report their success”, in turn paving the way for a local priest to visit and encourage villagers to accept instruction. According to Miche, neophytes, or “catechumens” were next graded according to age and ability and “distributed into the homes of Christians where catechists attend[ed]”.\textsuperscript{19} The catechist, a lay leader who had received some doctrinal education, taught the rudiments of the religion staying “the whole day, not returning to their respective residence until the cover of darkness”, to avoid arousing the suspicions of non-Catholic neighbours. As part of this arrangement, the house providing the venue was also “obliged to undertake great expenses to provide subsistence for everyone during the period of instruction”.\textsuperscript{20} Through October 1842, Fontaine claimed, the principal “retreat” for instruction in Gò Thitalic supported up to fifty catechumens. Normally, the mission had “30 to 50 pagans [new catechumens] at a time ... lodged, fed, [and] instructed”. So organised was the retreat that the mission had people “solely

\textsuperscript{17} Metzler, Ibid., p.135.
\textsuperscript{18} I believe Fontaine authored the letter on account of the date and location of its writing, Qui Nhơn. In February 1843, Duclos and Miche were in captivity, and Lefèbvre was in the Mekong delta. Only Cuenot remained in Qui Nhơn with Fontaine arriving some time in late 1842. The letter opens with a description of a stop in Singapore in 1842, which could not have been made by Cuenot. Fontaine[?], AMEP 749, 9/2/1843, pp.839-41.
\textsuperscript{19} Miche, AMEP 749, 26/12/1841, pp.249-50.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
Responding to Crisis: The 1840s Mission Reforms in Cochinchina

occupied with cooking rice and preparing food. After thirty to forty days of intensive instruction:

... those who had been sufficiently instructed and know the Christian prayers taught them by the Christians ... we admit them to holy Baptism which the Father of their district administers to them.

Mission gifts clearly aimed to secure the spiritual loyalty of new converts completed the process:

Each neophyte at the solemn [occasion] of Baptism receives a white habit that they keep for their usage ... [and receives] a medal and rosary etc.

It is difficult to imagine how new converts would have felt about the “white habits” given to them by the mission, particularly when in wider society, under normal circumstances, white was associated with death and reserved for funerals.

The continued success of conversion was ensured through the encouragement of catechists and new converts to invite other family members to seek instruction. Thus the most “fervent” converts were encouraged to “find 3 or 4 other pagans” each. The jump in adult baptisms and registered catechumens demonstrates the programme’s remarkable success after 1842. According to Fontaine, in the “four neighbouring provinces” – Binh Định, Quảng Ngãi, Quảng Nam and Khánh Hòa – the mission had undertaken “854 baptisms, 714 of which were in this province”, Binh Định. This rate exceeded figures of the 1830s and 1820s by up to eight times. In 1843, the number doubled to over sixteen hundred adult baptisms. This spectacular rise in converts, all of whom would have submitted to an intense period of indoctrination, represents an enormous achievement. It indicates the striking efficiency of Cuenot’s administration of the vicariate, the ambitious use of mission resources, indeed the motivation of numerous Catholics for assistance.

21 Fontaine, AMEP 749, 9/2/1843, pp.839-41.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., p.842.
24 In 1826, adult baptism numbered 106 (AMEP 747, p.1010), in 1828 it numbered 136 (AMEP 747, p.1013). In 1831 the number rose to 287 (AMEP 747, p.1105), then in 1838 it dropped to 113 (AMEP 748, p.1007).
The Gò Thị Synod concentrated the efforts of a greatly compromised local clergy and a mission organisation with the aim to consolidate activities. The Chapters embodied a striking shift to conservative social practices and a doctrinal discipline not seen before in the vicariate. But instead of repelling converts with the new demands, it attracted new numbers, the reasons for which deserve some attention. The spectacular rise in converts in the short term and the steady increase throughout the 1840s raises questions as to the personal motivations of neophytes. Above, I explained this rise in the context of greater mission resources and funding. However, other factors, such as changes in local attitudes, played a no less significant role.

In 1841, the commencement of a new reign not only saw a re-evaluation of court policies – notably the hold on the anti-Catholic campaign – it heralded the beginning of a new age and new attitudes in society. The commencement of the Thiệu Trị reign saw, for example, an immediate revival of Buddhism at court – Thiệu Trị was a devout Buddhist – beginning with the mourning rites for Minh Mạng. The change may also have influenced the more softened stance on Catholicism. Miche wrote in late 1841, “everywhere there is talk of conversion, and often they are conversions which astound”:

People who have resisted [conversion] ... in peaceful times, people who would never think of becoming Christians when they were able without danger, reveal themselves and demand baptism at the moment of peril.

At the time when Miche wrote, December 1841, the violence had subsided, but the memory of the previous years of repression, indeed the risk of violence, was still imminent. His reference to peaceful times is little more than nostalgia for the pre-1833 period. Yet at the end of 1841, it is likely that subjects responded to the new conditions. Without a clearly stated edict outlawing the religion under Thiệu Trị, subjects may have associated the new reign with a more lenient attitude, and believed that Catholicism was no longer forbidden. But it would be simplistic to assume this was the sole reason underpinning local motives.

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28 Miche, AMEP 749, 26/12/1841, p.250.
Widespread poverty and desperation, as Yoshiharu Tsuboi has suggested, may have been a primary factor. The long term desolation caused the Tây Sơn rebellion, the failure of the Gia Long and Minh Mạng reigns to redress land distribution and poverty, and unrelenting taxation saw the rise of a class of itinerants displaced from meagre landholdings and consequently disenfranchised from village life.\(^{29}\) Communities supported by the mission presented an oasis of modest financial security in a country where the threat of family devastation caused by drought, plague or disease loomed with each season. Conversion not only promised membership of a tightly organised, self-supporting community, it enfranchised the most desperate.\(^{30}\) Citing Nghệ An province as an example, Tsuboi suggests a connection between high rates of Catholic conversion here and the extreme economic hardship.\(^{31}\) Although conjecture, the idea has some value considering the growing funds reaching the mission from the late 1830s. However, mission sources do not readily reveal the socio-economic status of converts in the period, part of the reason being simply that severe poverty was so widespread as to be the norm. Also, different regions enjoyed high rates of conversion for reasons other than purely economic or communal incentive.

Based in the sparsely populated settler region of the Mekong delta, Lefèbvre highlighted further reasons, in particular drawing attention to demographic shifts. In 1843, he received a request by twenty Cambodians for instruction in one of the districts administered by him. Shortly after, he reported hearing – possibly through a local priest – of a village of six hundred people in the same canton as the first [the Cambodians] who wanted: “to come and settle in the area where I am living in order to receive the necessary instruction”.\(^{32}\) Such high numbers – essentially whole villages – suggests a number of possibilities. Foremost, this was a highly dynamic region in community settlement, trade and commerce, conflict between Vietnamese migrant and Khmer indigens, and in religious practices. In similar circumstances in eighteenth-century southern China, Robert Entenmann suggested that communal security and mutual support in unfamiliar and sparsely settled terrain attracted Han settlers to Catholic


\(^{30}\) Ibid., p.142.

\(^{31}\) Ibid.

\(^{32}\) Lefèbvre, AMEP 749, 29/01/1844, pp.963-64.
villages. In Cochinchina, it might be suggested, the mission’s rigid religious practices provided one alternative way of life in a region where formal political structures were relatively loose and the opportunity for personal advancement through education was very low.

The Gò Thì Synod signified a major turning point for the Cochinchina mission. It introduced a new rigour to mission practices, principally the catechising of neophytes, and in the short term saw an immediate rise in conversions. The rise can be explained as a response to the new political situation at the beginning of the Thiệu Trị reign, yet the wider advantages and benefits provided by membership to a chrétienté, I argue, also attracted new converts. A defining feature of the post-1841 period, however, was the mission’s increased capacity to accommodate and facilitate conversion, an improvement which can in part be explained by suggesting Cuenot’s administrative abilities.

II. Modernisation in the Cochinchina Mission: Sacraments, Finances and Propaganda

The Gò Thì Synod not only saw major changes in religious discipline on the ground, it began a new period in mission administration. In earlier decades, missionaries composed vicariate annual reports as lengthy letters outlining in narrative the main events of the year, including all the important issues facing the mission. They normally included information on local communities and politics, stories of conversions, unusual occurrences, and often finished with a brief table of the total number of sacraments – confessions, communion received, confirmations, etc. – administered for the entire vicariate. The appearance from 1841 of tabled reports with lists and figures of expenses, point-form descriptions of mission activities as well as sacraments administered by province, presents a striking change. Indeed, this development symbolised a watershed in missionary approaches, indicative of the evolution of Church activities in France in the previous two decades.

Removed from its privileged position during the Revolution in the late eighteenth century, the Church’s re-emergence after the fall of Napoleon was driven not by the remnant clerical hierarchy but instead by Catholic intellectuals who called for reform in the Church’s attitudes and activities. Initially, the movement for change had

Responding to Crisis: The 1840s Mission Reforms in Cochin

been motivated by Catholic aversion to the ascendancy of liberal politics in governance.\textsuperscript{34} In 1820s France, however, the emergence of a new public awareness in France of the social repercussions of the previous decades of social unrest – and industrialisation – and the need for greater Church involvement at the lowest levels of society added motivated change.\textsuperscript{35} From the early 1820s, influential sections of Catholic society increasingly called for the Church to focus its activities on charitable works and strengthen its involvement in social welfare to reclaim the moral high ground.\textsuperscript{36}

Established a decade after the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in Lyon in 1822, Frédéric Ozanam’s Society for Saint Vincent-de-Paul (1833) in particular embodied the transformation of Church activities and attitudes taking place in this time. Despite the modest beginnings of Ozanam’s efforts, his society presented a highly effective model which paved the way for the establishment of numerous other social welfare organisations and congregations. In contrast to earlier charitable organisations, the Society of Saint Vincent-de-Paul grew in a short period to become a highly organised, politically active, widely funded, inter-regional and later international organisations.\textsuperscript{37} A distinctive feature was the involvement of secular patrons in its administration, and the attention to raising funds in new ways, notably through subscriptions. Central to the expansion of such a funding base was the promotion of activities through publishing.

Also capitalising on the growing momentum of publishing, the mission promoted its activities in journals and books and tapped into growing public enthusiasm. The principal journal of this period, the \textit{Annals for the Propagation of the Faith}, published the private correspondence of missionaries from far-flung missions such as Cochin and in doing so became a powerful new medium for mission propaganda. For the first time in the history of the mission experiences, of conversion, persecution and martyrdom in distant “pagan” lands, were made available for mass publication and dissemination to ever larger audiences.\textsuperscript{38} This style of published

\textsuperscript{34} For example among intellectuals such as Felicité de Lammenais.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} The \textit{Nouvelles Lettres Édifiantes} were published from 1808 in Lyon, but as a a precursor to the \textit{Annals} did not reach the same audience. According to Cholvy members who subscribed in tens and together paid
correspondence, including Relations and personal letters, formed a distinct literary genre which combined the purpose of providing information on events in the mission with the edification of missionary endeavours. As a literary style, these accounts had a specific doctrinal function as a testimony in the application for an individual’s beatification and had long been a feature of Catholic discourse dating back to early Church history. More generally, along with personal letters, they stimulated readers to support mission work through donations, or inspire young men to enter the clergy.

As early as the mid-1830s, a generation before the French invasion of Cochinchina, published correspondence had a real impact on French Catholic perceptions of Vietnam, noticeable in the groundswell of support it inspired. Above all published correspondence shaped French Catholic perceptions of Vietnam through the rise of a narrative on Catholic persecution. To begin with, the rising prominence of the *Annals* stimulated an increase in the recruitment of young men to missionary ranks and also public donations to the mission’s work. In later years, missionaries cited executions in Vietnam as inspiration for wanting to serve in the region. For example, Jean Venard claimed news of Jean Cornay’s execution in 1837 attracted him to the priesthood whilst still a child.

The most striking indication of the *Annals*’ impact in Catholic society, both in terms of the audience size and support, can be seen with the steady rise of subscriptions and donations. From meagre receipts of 23,000 fr in 1822-23, the Society’s funds grew dramatically, reaching 255,000 fr in 1827. The most dramatic increases in subscriptions occurred during the 1830s. In 1835, the Society received over half a million francs; this jumped to just under one million in 1837, and a year later to one million three hundred

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41 From 1660 to 1822 one hundred and sixty two missionaries departed the MEP seminary for foreign missions. This same figure was achieved within three decades of the 1822 inauguration of the *Annals*, Guennou, *Missions Étrangères de Paris*, p.241. In Cochinchina, twelve missionaries were dispatched between 1821 and 1832, a significant expansion on the four that arrived between 1792 and 1815; see also, Cholvy, *La Religion en France*, p.33.

42 *APF* XXXVI (1864), p.137.
Responding to Crisis: The 1840s Mission Reforms in Cochinchna

thousand francs. This represented an increase of nearly 150% in just three years.\textsuperscript{43} Apart from reflecting a growing public consciousness in French society in the period and the \textit{Annals} popularity, the dramatic increase was linked to the reporting of violence in Catholic missions. These significant jumps coincided with articles appearing in 1836 of Marchand’s execution, for example. Correspondence reporting the execution of several missionaries in Vietnam in 1837 and 1838 undoubtedly stimulated subscription increases in the following year. Thus, in 1840 receipts soared to nearly two-and-half million francs.\textsuperscript{44}

The wide dissemination of Catholic print-media from the 1820s, I suggest, needs to be viewed in the context of emerging French nationalist sentiment. Other Catholic journals, including the influential \textit{L’Univers} edited by the Louis Veuillot,\textsuperscript{45} also contributed to the process. At this early stage, Catholic literature emphasised the religious dimensions of the mission endeavour. It nonetheless had a normative effect on public perceptions of mission work abroad. Over the following decades, these journals played a central role in the creation of an historiographic reality on Catholic persecution in Nguyễn Vietnam. In the meantime, the promotion of charitable works through journals represented a paradigm shift in the mobilisation of congregation support for Church activities. It saw the transformation of converts from passive donors to active subscribers.

Together, secular-administered charitable organisations and greater public involvement generated unprecedented momentum in Church activity, politically and financially, from the 1830s, and in turn paved the way for new initiatives in overseas missions. This development affected Cochinchina in a two-fold manner: it informed new approaches to mission administration, the successes of which, when promoted in France, further saw to increases in funding allocations for its mission. In stark contrast to his predecessors, Cuenot was highly competent in identifying this connection and exploiting it for the benefit of his vicariate.

Small clues draw our attention to the changing role of mission activities and its relationship with supporters in France. The 1847 vicariate report, for example, draws

\textsuperscript{43} See Nola Cooke, “Early Nineteenth-Century Vietnamese Catholics and Others in the Pages of the \textit{Annales de la Propagation de la Foi”, Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, Forthcoming 2004, p.13, Table 1.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{45} First printed in 1833.
Responding to Crisis: The 1840s Mission Reforms in Cochinchina

attention to a new financial source for the mission, the Association for the Holy Childhood\textsuperscript{46}, founded in Lyon in 1843. The Holy Childhood, or \textit{Ste. Enfance}, represented the culmination of earlier welfare efforts and epitomised French Catholic charitable organisations in the 1840s. It combined the evangelical vision of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith with the social welfare agenda of the Society of St. Vincent-de-Paul. As with the Propaganda for the Faith, the \textit{Ste. Enfance} received funds primarily through subscriptions. The organisation directed these funds to three key activities: the baptism of dying children, particularly “pagans”; the sponsorship of health and education for children; and, assistance in the adoption of orphaned children into Christian families. Significantly, the society encouraged membership primarily among children, and drew the lion’s share of its resources from individual subscriptions of only sixty centimes per annum.\textsuperscript{47}

The mission used these funds to purchase the children of poverty-stricken parents and to establish orphanages.\textsuperscript{48} The practice of selling children represented little more than bonded sponsorship whereby in desperate times a parent could “sell” a child to the mission, and redeem the child later for an agreed price. The practice occurred usually in times of famine, or after a cholera epidemic had swept through a region killing large numbers within communities.\textsuperscript{49} Otherwise, missionaries often persuaded non-Catholic families to have their dying children baptised for the single imperative of saving a soul.\textsuperscript{50} The first reference of funds received by the mission appears in Cuenot’s 1847 annual report for East Cochinchina, only three years after the Association’s foundation. Cuenot reported the receipt in 1846 of four thousand francs from the \textit{Ste. Enfance}, which he had directed to the “purchase of orphans and the baptism of dying children”.\textsuperscript{51} At this early stage of the Association’s work, Cuenot was unable to account precisely for all funds – the bulk of which was absorbed by other mission activities – on account of already stretched resources. Thus, of the allocation sent, only half had been spent on baptising children and maintaining orphanages.

\textsuperscript{46} Société pour le Sainte Enfance.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., p.133.
\textsuperscript{49} Duclos, \textit{AMEP} 749, 17/01/1842, no.61.
\textsuperscript{50} Cuenot noted the cost of baptising children at a rate of one franc for four dying pagan children; see Cuenot, “Etat des Recettes et Dépenses, 1848”, \textit{AMEP} 750, no.40.
\textsuperscript{51} Cuenot, “Etats des recettes et dépenses effectués depuis le 1er Novembre 1846 jusqu’a 1er Novembre 1847”, \textit{AMEP} 750, no.34.
Responding to Crisis: The 1840s Mission Reforms in Cochinina

Apart from highlighting a new activity, reference to the expansion of charitable activities signified the strengthening of bonds between mission work on the ground and public opinion and perception in France. The essence of this bond can be seen with the increased citation of statistics in annual reports. In 1841, for example, the mission baptised 1,881 dying “infidel” children, in contrast to over three thousand children of Catholic parents.52 This figure jumped remarkably in 1843 to 8,273 dying “infidel” children to 2,599 Catholic children.53 For 1847 in East Cochinina, the figure stood at 5,863 “dying children”54 against 1,778 “children of Christians”.55

All grist for annual reports to the Society for the Propagation of the Faith and the Holy Childhood, these statistics were gleefully published in the pages of the Annals as proof of the mission’s rigour and enthusiasm, presenting a focus for readers in France. It did not matter that the majority of “dying infidel children” baptised by the mission did not survive – Cuenot’s 1843 report noted that of 2,565 dying children baptised only 534 survived56 – the principal aim was to save souls. According to contemporary sensibilities, whether a child survived illness after baptism was of secondary importance to the act itself. As Miche crooned exultingly of the sponsorship,

> It is thus you who populate Heaven with these innocent creatures who would be expelled if you had not come to open their way. Thanks to you, these children have become friends of God, and their acknowledgement by you assures their protection.57

Apart from citing the benevolent use of Church funds, the recording of baptisms and deaths represented a statistical triumph of the mission’s progress.

To complement the new efficiency in mission management, Cuenot ordered the collection of records and accounts on the arrest, punishment and executions of local Catholics. After the Gò Thị Synod Cuenot appointed local “commissioners” to create a catalogue of the experiences of victims of the “persecution”, the purpose of which was to provide edifying material in “circular letters” to be disseminated to all priests and

52 Cuenot, AMEP 749, 10/08/1842 p.811.
54 The reference in the catalogue does not specify whether these were “infidel” children. However, the figure appears immediately below “infants of Christians”, thus suggesting the distinction.
55 Cuenot, “Etats des recettes et dépenses effectués depuis le 1er Novembre 1846 jusqu’a 1er Novembre 1847”, AMEP 750, no.34.
Responding to Crisis: The 1840s Mission Reforms in Cochinchina

crétientés in the vicariate. Although these stories were neatly recorded in Latin and accompanied annual reports sent to the Vatican, they also had enormous propaganda potential within the Vietnamese mission. Translated into quốc ngữ, romanised Vietnamese, the stories served as examples for the instruction for Catholics and neophytes in the mission. A letter in quốc ngữ by Cuenot from 1844 provides an example. Concentrating on the reign of the Nguyễn king Võ Vương (1738-1765), the letter related the acts of “thầy Tùng”, or “Teacher [catechist] Tùng”, who was executed in 1750, during a brief anti-Catholic repression. Circulated to different crétientés and read aloud by the local priest as a lesson, the impact of this letter on its audience must have been great. Missionaries readily framed the experience in terms of religious interests, thus according to Fontaine the “acts of our venerable martyrs”, were a “great cause of consolation and encouragement” for local Catholics. However, such stories I believe had more subtle implications by contributing to the nurturing of a community consciousness among Catholics in the vicariate.

Conversely, accounts sent to Europe and published in Catholic journals, such as the Annals, had a no less significant impact over the long term on French Catholic society. Along with the “Relations” of missionaries, these stories of local experiences played an instrumental role in shaping European perceptions of Catholicism in Asia. Such accounts presented Vietnamese Catholics in similar terms of reference as early Church Christians persecuted during the late Roman Empire, and in doing so promoted the view that Christianity would triumph in Asia as it had in Rome. Moreover, the overlap of the ancient Church narrative effectively reduced the exotic impression of Asian cultures for French readers, elevating the profile of the Catholic cause in Asia through highly idealised historical metaphors. A letter from Cuenot in late 1839 reporting on the arrest of twelve Catholics in Phú Yên illustrates this familiarisation.

The names of these intrepid soldiers of Jesus Christ bring too much honour to the Annamite Church to not cite them to their brothers in Europe. They are: Quê, Kha, Câm, Thiện and his father, his mother and his young brother ...
Perhaps of most immediate consequence, the mobilisation of French congregation support for Church activities, from passive donation to active subscription, entailed a fundamental shift in French Catholic perceptions. It saw a shift from giving in acquiescence to giving with perceived benefit as audiences read about the use of funds by missionaries.

Central to both of these developments, in Cochinchina and in France, was the dialogue in the raw figures and facts of mission successes on the ground in the vicariate. From the early 1840s, Mgr. Cuenot’s emphasis on meticulous bookkeeping of mission activities, such as statistics of sacraments administered, population figures, financial expenditure, combined with concern for mission history, archived stories of the deeds of faithful “servants”, played a key role in the consolidation of Church activities. As a cornerstone of mission annual reporting, they formed the basis for a dialogue between mission work on the ground and the media engine driving public and Church support in France.

III. Threat and Security
Shortly after the Gò Thị Synod, Cuenot launched a special mission to establish a congregation among the upland communities to the west of Phú Yên province. The plan was strategic. The Đê lived on the margins of Phú Yên’s bureaucratic reach and apparently had good ties with “Laotians” further west and Vietnamese merchants traversing the region; a congregation here had the potential to open the way for the establishment of a permanent base beyond the threat of danger from Huệ’s rule. The mission, led by Miche, Duclos and some Vietnamese translators and porters, set out along the River Ba (sông Ba) from Hoa Vòng chrétienté, following the route taken by the Vietnamese “couriers” seven months earlier. After only several short days of roaming around the upland plateau beyond Phúc Son fort, the expedition was arrested

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62 This expedition, the first by missionaries in the nineteenth century followed numerous failed attempts at mission establishment in the highlands in the eighteenth century. In late 1839, Cuenot reported a successful reconnaissance by local clergy into the “mountains which separate Cochinchina from Cambodia and Laos” (Cuenot, AMEP 748, [copy] 13/09/1839, pp. 1167-68). This report demonstrates a fair understanding of the area’s social geography. His efforts now turned specifically on the “Đê” people, a group who neighboured the “Chu Rai” and were ruled by the “Fire king” – known in Vietnamese dynastic records as “Hoa xì” – who annually sent “an ambassador” to the neighbouring Vietnamese provincial capital of Phú Yên. (see for example, DNTL XXIII, p.145).

63 Duclos, AMEP 749, 17/01/1842, p.61.
by a group of Vietnamese soldiers who had been tipped off by merchants trading in the uplands. They were subsequently marched in cangues to Phú Yên for interrogation.\(^{64}\)

In Huế, Duclos and Miche smuggled a letter out of prison to M. Barrot, the French consul general in Manilla.\(^{65}\) Calling on the Consul General for assistance in seeking their release, the letter opens with the plaintive cry that the two had been "victims of the most unjust violation of the law of nations" (le droit de gens).\(^{66}\) After detailing the torture they faced after their capture, the letter repeated the complaint delivered to Phú Yên’s magistrate that they had been arrested "outside Annamite territory...and on free land". Such an impassioned appeal, aimed prudently at the newly established French diplomatic presence, had its desired impact. In late 1843, a corvette, l’Héroïne, captained by Favin-Levêque, arrived in Đà Nẵng harbour to negotiate the release of Duclos and Miche, as well as three others from the Tonkin missions.\(^{67}\) According to the dynastic records the court pardoned and released the five on the grounds of their ignorance of the proscription.\(^{68}\)

Unhappily for Huế, this incident began a series of increasingly belligerent French naval visits which culminated in the Lapierre attack on Đà Nẵng harbour in 1847. Less noticeable in this period, however, were the repercussions these incursions had in local settings. Not ignoring the significance of increased French aggression in the 1840s, the following section highlights some of the broader social changes in the period brought about through the use of mission funds at the lowest levels of society. As tensions escalated over the release of missionaries, earlier measures combined with the mission reforms instituted under Cuenot led to an expansion of bribery and extortion involving Catholics and officials. But unlike earlier periods, this insidious practice drew on unprecedented levels of mission funding.

Before the 1840s the mission normally received an allocation, a "viaticum" or "food for a journey", of 500 francs per annum per missionary which arrived, if secure

\(^{64}\) Duclos, AMEP 749, 29/05/1842, pp.357-362.

\(^{65}\) Miche and Duclos, AMEP 749, 18/05/1842, pp.329-32.

\(^{66}\) Ibid.

\(^{67}\) Given that it may have taken months for the May 1842 letter composed by Duclos and Miche to have left Vietnam, the timing of the February 1843 expedition from Macao was probably launched within weeks of notice arriving. The other three included: Galy and Berneux, who were captured in Phuc Nhac chretienté, Nam Định, by Trịnh Quang Khanh, April 1841; and Charrier, who was captured in Bâu No, Sơn Tây province in October, 1841.

\(^{68}\) DNTL XXIV (1842-43), p.288.
Responding to Crisis: The 1840s Mission Reforms in Cochinchina

shipping permitted, each year.\textsuperscript{69} Mission expenditure, which was generally very low, was decentralised and utilised by individual missionaries according to their particular needs. Although the absence of clear archival records makes it difficult to locate when the first changes occurred in allocations and funding levels, Cuenot’s 1844 to 1845 report reveals a remarkable shift to a consolidated management.\textsuperscript{70} This document, which comprises details of finances not only highlights the unprecedentedly high levels of funds flowing from Europe, it reveals a wide variety of activities not mentioned in previous annual reports.

The 1844-45 expenses report outlined a budget of nearly 45 thousand francs – the equivalent roughly of 22 thousand ligatures of copper cash or over a thousand silver taels – which by contemporary prices would have seen the purchase of enough rice, around 10,000 measures (phuông), to feed an army.\textsuperscript{71} Having received the allocation in 1844, Cuenot divided the sum and distributed 15,000 francs to the newly established vicariate of West Cochinchina – a division covering the provinces from Bình Hòa to Cambodia – retaining thirty thousand for East Cochinchina.\textsuperscript{72} For 1845, Cuenot used 11,000 francs for the expenses of his office in Quy Nhon, his clergy and “other people attached to the mission”, presumably his clerks and couriers.\textsuperscript{73} Two thousand francs paid for the travel expenses of missionaries arriving and departing the mission. He had directed 1,500 francs to the mission’s “establishments”, for example, the vicariate’s Latin college in Gò Thị. The outlay of such extraordinary funds accounts for the mission’s ability, first and foremost, to support the sharp growth in conversions in the early 1840s. It is with the final two expenses, however, that we see the extent to which mission involvement in society had increased in response to the anti-Catholic campaign.


\textsuperscript{70} Cuenot, “Etats des Recettes et des Dépenses effectués pour l’Année 1845”. \textit{AMEP} 750, no.9.

\textsuperscript{71} This calculation is based on an average of provincial rice prices for the Six Provinces in the mid-1840s from Nguyễn Thế Anh, “Quelques Aspects Économiques et Sociaux du Problème du riz au Vietnam dans la Premières Moitié du XIXe Siècle”, \textit{Bulletin de la Société des Études Indochnoises} XLII (new series), 1-2, 1967, p.9.

\textsuperscript{72} In 1844, the Vatican ordered the division of the vicariate in two: East Cochinchina (\textit{Cocinensis Orientalis}) and West Cochinchina (\textit{Cocinensis Occidentalis}). East Cochinchina covered the provinces from Quảng Bình south to Bình Thuận, and the chretiêntés from Bình Hòa to Hà Tiên and the Kingdom of Cambodia fell under the administration of West Cochinchina.

\textsuperscript{73} Cuenot’s account also lays bare divisions within the mission hierarchy, between the missionaries and the local priesthood. For his Coadjutor and the six missionaries in his service, Cuenot set aside 6,000 francs. In stark contrast, the vicariate’s twenty-one local priests received a total of only one thousand francs.

- 108 -
The first sum, “for the special needs of the vicariate”, at 9,230 francs, represented the second largest expense of 1844-45. According to Cuenot’s report, it had delivered:

... safety to old and new Christians; to the first [old Christians] to remove them from vexation and superstition and provide them with necessary instruction; to the second [new Christians] to aid them and settle them in the midst of Christians, etc. [to pay for] the maintenance of catechumens during their instruction, the redemption of some of their children or parents, etc. ...”

As demonstrated in the breadth of expenses covered by mission expenditure, financial resources were increasingly directed to buying security for Catholics, either through bribery or through resettlement. Indeed, from the early 1840s, Cuenot’s mission reports record ever-increasing amounts being directed to what he ambiguously termed “special expenses”, or the “special needs” of the mission. These expenses, which cost the mission around a third of its budget in some years and threw the 1846 to 1847 accounts into a seventeen thousand franc deficit, included a raft of unpleasant transactions. The “special needs” not only included assisting converts to resettle, but covered the costs associated with the maintenance of Catholics in prison or in exile, and increasingly in paying-off local officials and bandits taking advantage of the compromised status of Catholic neighbours. The record also noted an expense of six thousand francs for maintaining “our prisoners”, that is imprisoned or exiled Catholics, numbering some fifty-five, who were being held at “different points of the vicariate.”

The financial records for November 1846 to November 1847 present a careful breakdown and offer insights into other activities. In 1847, for example, the East Cochin mission maintained 45 exiles and prisoners at a cost of 1,600 francs. This expense, which provided food and assistance, equalled twenty taels (according to official records); an amount similar to that received by Lê Ngọc Thế for his capture of Ignacious Delgado in Can Lao village in 1838. For the village searches carried out through the region in 1847, described by Cuenot as “the crisis”, he spent 7,500 francs. This amount, equal to around 94 taels, was probably distributed to numerous chrétiéntés

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74 Cuenot, “Etats des Recettes et des Dépenses effectués pour l’Année 1845”, AMEP 750, no.9  
75 Cuenot, “1844-45”, AMEP 750, no.9, and “1846-47”, no.32.  
76 Ibid.  
77 Cuenot, “Etats des recettes et dépenses effectués depuis le 1er Novembre 1846 jusqu’a 1er Novembre 1847”, AMEP 750, no.34.
in East and West Cochinchina to smooth the impact of official inquiries made to capture missionaries, or have Catholics publicly recant. It would easily have paid the annual salaries of nearly one hundred district magistrates (tri huyện). In short, this expenditure would have more than satisfied the annual incomes of low-level officials, such as canton heads, and middle-level officials, magistrates and prefects, and, in turn, neutralised the rewards offered by the court for the capture of missionaries and local priests.

If we consider that each month a lowly soldier received around one ligature of cash and one measure of rice – the equivalent of a ligature of cash – and the greater population earned not much more, the mission must have presented an attractive target to many. Just as the system of financial rewards for the capture of missionaries under Minh Mạng broadened the scope for corruption within the bureaucracy, the arrival of increased mission funds intensified the danger of extortion beyond expectations under Thiệu Trị. While the mission had greater funds at its disposal, it still had to compete with the rewards offered by the court.

Lefèbvre’s translation of the royal edict announcing the arrest of Berneux and Galy in 1841, details the range of monetary prizes distributed and draws attention to the range of beneficiaries. The first major arrest of the new reign, the capture of these two missionaries earned Nam Định’s governor Trịnh Quang Khanh a boost to his career and he also received “a gold ring, a precious stone and a piece of gold”. Substantial rewards also flowed to others involved. According to dynastic records, the court set aside 1000 ligatures of cash for the arrests. It noted that the provincial prefect in charge at the time should have been punished for failing to act earlier, but conceded that as he was new to the province he should be excused and was therefore also awarded a gold ring. The court ordered that to all the:

inferior mandarins, [and] all those who have contributed to the capture, soldiers and people, [in] following the orders of the Saintly King, will go 1000 ligatures (quan) from the public treasury for their recompense [to be] shared among each according to merit and justice.

78 DNTL XXI, p.264.  
80 DNTL XXIII (1841), pp.185-86.
Furthermore, the two officials principally responsible for the capture received "ten ounces of silver [ten taels] each, for their pains and to engage others to follow their example." The distribution of rewards to low-level officials and villagers is less clear. Lefèvre’s translation revealed that executive mandarins received royal gifts and won status but not necessarily financial reward. Senior mandarins distributed cash and silver rewards to their officials, who in turn would have doled out these sums to soldiers and peasants. Yet it is highly likely that those lower in the social hierarchy received only a fraction of what was set aside, while senior officials customarily horded a portion for themselves. Rather, the most immediate impact of the system of rewards was the erosion of trust in mixed communities. The most clearly visible result of this in the 1840s was the splintering of mixed villages.

In the search for security from violence and relief from the repression, Catholics, and in some cases whole chrétientés, sought isolated locations away from mixed villages or at least on the margins of Vietnamese bureaucratic control. The move to isolated settlements in the 1830s and 1840s was not a new trend, however. Earlier, in the late eighteenth century, Catholics from around Huế established settlements such as Tân Triệu and Lai Thiệu to escape the upheaval of the Tây Sơn rebellion. As Nguyễn Hồng Dương has observed, geography, patterns of settlement and transitory village ties in the far south enabled Catholics to establish secluded settlements. These southern chrétientés differed in size and in the rigidity of their social organisation, from the well-established, corporate “Catholic Village” of Tonkin. Southern Catholics congregated in small communities that over time grew into villages and merged in peaceful periods with non-Catholics. But from the 1840s, these isolated breakaway settlements became increasingly common in some areas in Cochinchina.

Although it is difficult to estimate the number of these communities, short chrétienté monographs authored by French missionaries in the early twentieth century

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81 Lefèvre, AMEP 749, 25/05/1841, pp.28-30.
Responding to Crisis: The 1840s Mission Reforms in Cochinchina

reveal several examples.\(^85\) Tha La, northwest of Saigon in present day Tây Ninh province, was established in 1836, according to Père Victor Quinton. A core group of thirty sought the isolation of the west Biên Hòa hinterland to escape court retribution after the Lê Văn Khôi rebellion. Several of the settlers reportedly had “pagan wives”, and over the course of twenty-seven years – to 1863 – the community grew substantially to 299 people.\(^86\) Similarly, a single family established Cầu Ngang, southwest of Trà Vinh in the Mekong delta, around 1840. Isolated among the swampy tidal canals of present day Trà Vinh province, the self-declared chrétienté attracted Catholics from other long-established and well-known Mekong centres, including neighbouring Cái Mon, Cái Nhurn and Bái Xan. Despite the dangers, the settlement managed to build a thatch Church shortly after 1840.\(^87\)

The shift to all-Catholic villages coincided with the increased dangers faced by Catholics living in mixed villages. But other experiences also forced Catholics to seek refuge elsewhere. As seen in the annual reports, the mission diverted large sums of funding to pay for the release of Catholics from what was known as “debt-bondage”. This arrangement may have referred to indentured service or slavery, a not uncommon practice in the period. Under these particular circumstances, I believe, the arrangement appears to have been a simple extortion bond between Catholics and neighbours based on an exchange of property in return for safety from threat of being denounced to the local mandarin.\(^88\)

Nowhere is the use of these funds more revealing than in local efforts to avoid communal disaster through punitive search. In 1844, based in the Mekong chrétienté of Cái Mon, Lefèebvre escaped arrest for months despite several local mandarins apparently

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\(^{85}\) I found these monographs photocopied and presented – some translated into Vietnamese – in a volume compiled by Lê-ô Nguyễn Văn Quí, Sưu Tập Những Hộ Dạo Cô Xưa Tây Đảng Trong [A Compilation on the Ancient Chretiénés of West Cochinchina], 1991. The volume can be found in the library of St Joseph Seminary Saigon. As a compilation of different archival material, it is unlikely that the volume can be found elsewhere. I believe the archival material was selected from the Archepiscopal office of the Bishop of Saigon on Phan Đình Phùng st, in Hô Chi Minh City.


\(^{87}\) In 1846, the Church was reportedly sacked and razed by local Khmer no doubt angry at the insatiable expansion of Vietnamese settlement. The passage on Cầu Ngang is a Vietnamese translation of a history composed by Amans Benoit, an MEP missionary stationed in the Vicariate between 1889 and 1912. It seems certain that Benoit’s history would have been based on oral recollection by locals Catholics in the 1890s.

\(^{88}\) Cuenot, “1843-44”, AMEP 750, no.9, and “1846-47”, no.32; see also Lefèebvre, AMEP 748, 22/11/1844, p.1016.
being aware of his presence. But the peace was soon broken at the beginning of October when officials from Trà Vinh prefecture swooped on the chrétienté village, arresting him, a local priest and three of his lay Church leaders. The local militia completely ransacked the village, attacking peasants and looting houses. One of his servants, he reported, was so badly beaten that he died of his wounds. This attack had a number of ramifications. For the officials involved, there was the imminent threat of demotion for failing to make the arrests earlier. Indeed, the prefectural mandarin immediately sought to shift the risk to his position by launching criminal proceedings against his own subordinate officials, those who had made the arrests in the first place. On the receiving end of the ordeal, the chrétienté faced dispersal and the village heads serious punishment. Here mission funds played an indispensable role. Not only did Lefèvre ensure gentle treatment for himself and a local doctor (and student), Phước, who was also caught in the raid – at a cost of “at 200 ligatures” (worth four taels of silver) for himself and “two bars of silver” for the priest – but he also saw to the survival of the village. Although nearly completely destroyed, officials allowed its re-establishment at the cost of 30 silver taels.

IV. Official Encounters and Recriminations

Lefèvre composed a detailed account of his capture and interrogation, providing us with one of the most illuminating insights into official perspectives of the mission. After being taken to Vĩnh Long, the apostolic vicar was presented before the “grand mandarin”, whom I believe was the acting provincial Governor-general (tông đốc), Nguyễn Tri Phương. Lefèvre diligently recorded a series of encounters with Phương, including snippets of conversation, to provide a highly reliable source for discerning official attitudes and biases. These letters highlight some of the less impressive actions

89 Lefèvre, AMEP 749, 29/1/1844, p.961.
90 Lefèvre, AMEP 749 22/11/1844, pp.1001-16.
91 Ibid.
92 Discovering who the Vĩnh Long Governor-general was at this point is somewhat tricky. Nguyễn Tri Phương is referred to as the Vĩnh Long-Dình Tường tông đốc at the beginning of 1844 (DNTL XXV, p.48), but his official biography records that he assumed governor duties of An Giang and Hà Tiên in mid-1844 (LT III, p.431, see also DNTL XXV, p.121). Then in a memorial dated January 1845 – several months after Lefèvre’s capture – Nguyễn Tri Phương is referred to as the provisional governor (nguyên thủ tông đốc) of Vĩnh Long-Dình Tường (DNTL XXV, p.220). It appears that as this was a relatively sparsely populated region the bureaucratic hierarchy was limited. From the early 1840s Nguyễn Tri Phương perhaps acted as the tông đốc for not only An Giang and Hà Tiên but also for neighbouring Vĩnh Long and Định Tường. Lefèvre’s capture also coincided with Phương’s campaign’s across the region to “pacify” Khmer insurgents.
and failings of his catechists during their interrogation. Normally, if he had intended composing this for publication one can assume that the depiction of events would have been quite different. Instead, this letter was addressed to Cuenot – hence its containing large sections of Quốc ngữ transcriptions without French translations – and is a quite open history of events, shorn of dramatic missionary rhetoric.

What is most striking about this encounter is Governor Phuong’s relaxed demeanour. On their first meeting, Phuong was overcome with curiosity, asking the vicar after his age, closely inspecting his long beard and foreign face. He noted disbelievingly that a man of only 35 years – Phuong was around 45 – could achieve the status of a “thầy”, a teacher or master, which outside the Catholic context might refer to a doctor. He treated Lefèbvre with unusual hospitality, offering him a cigar, food and a place to sleep in his own residence. In turn the Lefèbvre was appropriately mannered, addressing the Governor as “bâm ông”, the polite form of address for superior officials. But apart from the small-talk, Phuong’s unquenchable curiosity draws attention to a central predisposition among Vietnamese for the healing features of Catholicism.

Ever since the religion was first introduced to Vietnam in the sixteenth century, Catholicism was perceived through the lens of popular sensibilities as a healing religion. The whole repertoire of Catholic practices, from baptism, to the Eucharist and Extreme unction, corresponded and reinforced local views on the immanence of spiritual powers. In popular belief, Illness for example was associated with the presence of a malevolent spirit rather than any pathological frailty. The repertoire of Catholic rituals were seen as offering one method to divine the presence of a spirit and remedy for its expulsion.\(^n{93}\) In contemporary times, the court’s vilification of the religion was based on attacking this reputation. Highlighting an inverse view of its healing agency, official perspectives claimed that Catholic ritual mislead believers. Not only was Catholic doctrine suspect but its superstitious rituals “mesmerised”, mê, subjects. Thus, it is a little surprising to read of Phuong’s candid preoccupation with different religious objects gathered with Lefèbvre at his arrest.

Taking a small box, for example, the Governor opened a bottle of the vicar’s specially blessed holy oil and sticking his finger into the jar raised it to his nose to smell. Phuong demanded to know what it was and Lefèbvre responded it was “ordinary

\(^{93}\) For further discussion see, Nola Cooke, “Missionary Praxis and Christianity as a Popular Healing Religion in Seventeenth-Century Nguyen Cochinchina”, unpublished manuscript.
Responding to Crisis: The 1840s Mission Reforms in Cochinchina

oil”, to which the Governor countered: “but what is its virtue?” The Governor seized on a small bottle of quinine, and this time interrogated a canton head ("tông") by the name of Lôi as to its effectiveness. He further demanded whether the missionary had any other medicines in his possession. Then, turning to some leftover jars of flour and wine – most of which the soldiers had apparently drunk – he sought clarification as to whether these were not “thuốc mê”, or what might be translated as “medicine used for mesmerising”. Lefèbvre responded with great indignation stating that such perceptions were nothing more than “atrocious slander invented by enemies of the religion”, at which Phuang retorted rather provocatively: “but don’t you steal the eyes of dead children in order to make medicine”?

Lefèbvre wrote this letter as a captive, thus his discussions with Phuang are best understood as inflated presentations of his efforts to dispel the myths and prejudices that had become so dangerous for the mission and were apparently so widely held within the mandarinate. Yet, it seems, that the Governor’s opinions were long entrenched and evidently not so malicious as Lefèbvre seems to portray them. Indeed, it is highly curious that the Governor should have bothered to be so hospitable, granting him so much latitude and time in the first place. This letter gives the impression that Lefèbvre missed the whole point of his special treatment by Phuang, the essence of which is captured in a late exchange shortly before the narrative turns to other issues.

In an attempt to enlighten the Governor on the “truths” of the religion, at one point the apostolic vicar delivered a lengthy lecture to Phuang who, according to Lefèbvre, listened attentively to his every word. After the monologue, the Governor apparently responded that the apostolic vicar’s comments held true and were reasonable. But he then added, and with remarkable sarcasm, that listening to the vicar’s speech, the words “had gone into his heart,” and he had “nearly been mesmerised” in the process. Such a spontaneous response, not at all suggestive of the Lefèbvre’s embellishment, highlights Phuang’s near lack of interest in the missionary’s homily. Rather, it refers back to his open curiosity in the missionary’s religious objects and Lefèbvre himself as a bit of spectacle.

95 As recorded in Lefèbvre’s letter: “sự dĩ nghe cẽ- dỗng; nghe thì nờ thẳm vào long, chg tôi cẽ- dã gần mê”. Ibid.
More generally, the encounter draws attention to a critical feature of Nguyễn antipathy to Catholicism, the difficulty in ensuring some uniformity of perspectives among authorities. Governor Phương’s behaviour would have been considered somewhat unorthodox among his more intellectually rigorous colleagues. Entertaining a missionary, seeking out medicines in the missionary’s belongings, for rumoured healing properties, not only demonstrated his willingness to dabble in questions of superstitious practices, it betrayed his lack of seriousness in implementing the anti-Catholic measures. Such openness was a reflection of the wide gulf between official perspectives contained in court edicts and the more locally oriented views of mandarins in the provinces. If Phương subscribed completely to court concerns on the dangers of the religion, tasting the left over Mass wine would have been unimaginable. Instead, it was the official perspectives of Catholicism that were out of step with popular conception, a discrepancy which the court was acutely aware.

In late December, after two months of interrogation in Vinh Long, an edict arrived ordering that Lefèbvre, Phước and the three lay leaders be placed in irons and moved to Huế. Also, thanks to this edict the mandarins involved in the raids received a second official reward for the captures. According to Lefèbvre, the military officer in charge of the raid, Nguyễn Văn Phuong received two coins specially minted during the Minh Mạng reign.96 The district magistrate of Trà Vinh, Bùi Hữu Nghĩa, a prominent local scholar who in the 1860s would lead a fierce resistance against French forces, also received one.97 A further 100 ligatures of cash were distributed to the 130 soldiers involved in the raid. Interestingly, Lefèbvre noted, several officials were concerned that their having extorted money and received rewards would be reported by him in Huế. They “made numerous excuses and several honourable visits” to him before his departure in which, Lefèbvre noted, “their hypocrisy was too visibly the principle”. The mandarins, he observed, “feared singularly that we would reveal their embezzlement at the royal city”.98 After a lengthy overland journey, the party guarding Lefèbvre reached Huế in March 1845. Fortunately for Lefèbvre, he smuggled a letter out of prison and

96 Special coins minted during the Minh Mạng reign, “nган tiền Phi Long hàng lơn”, “Ascending Dragon coin, high value”, DNTL XXV, p. 173.
98 Lefèbvre, AMEP 749, 8/3/1845, p.1111.
alerted French naval forces in the region of his predicament. In June, a French naval envoy arrived at Đà Nẵng and secured his release.

Illicit arrangements, bribery and extortion, afforded chrétiens a relatively high degree of security from threat. In fact, by the mid-1840s such arrangements underpinned relationships between chrétiens and officials and had become an entrenched feature of accommodation. Despite the unfortunate danger of over-exploitation, or extortion by spiteful neighbours, criminals and opportunists, such illicit agreements offered Catholics protection from the threat of searches and enabled them to resist conforming to court edicts on the observance of state-cults. Security in many cases equated with anonymity; communities continued to pay taxes but increasingly lived in settlements apart from non-Catholic villages. However, the threat of punitive searches always loomed. Catholics lived on the margins of the Nguyễn state, but not beyond its reach.

From the mid 1840s French naval activity in the Southeast Asia region led to increased diplomatic interference in Vietnam on behalf of the mission. The dispatch of ships to Đà Nẵng ensured the release of missionaries from Huế’s prisons, but for the court it only confirmed the external military threat associated with mission activity. In June 1845 the French corvette *l’Alcémène* arrived in Đà Nẵng where commander Fornier-Duplan negotiated Lefèbvre’s release. The apostolic vicar was repatriated to Singapore and within a year attempted to re-enter the south. Travelling with Duclos, the two were captured in June 1846 on the Saigon river after failing to bribe a customs mandarin. Disaster followed, not only for the two missionaries – Duclos died in prison several weeks later – but for the newly formed West Cochinchina vicariate. As Miche reported in a letter from February 1847, the boat on which the two were travelling was impounded. On it, the annual allocation of money and goods were lost. Shortly after, following a pattern of externally provoked recriminations, the court launched a campaign of searches throughout Biên Hòa to arrest family members of Matthêu Gảm, the captain of the ship which conveyed the two missionaries from Singapore.


100 Miche, *AMEP* 755, 2/2/1847, no.18.

101 Ibid.
Responding to Crisis: The 1840s Mission Reforms in Cochinchina

Based in Biên Hòa, Miche reported in February 1847 that “all mandarins, lowly and high, prefects, sub-prefects, canton-chiefs, village chiefs view with greed the Xtientés in their jurisdiction”. \(^{102}\) Renewed efforts to have all villages conform to royal edict on ancestor worship and the shrines provided grounds for exploitation. Miche wrote:

The insatiable greediness of small village chiefs exploits this effort (*mise*) magnificently. House visits are made from one end of the province to the next, and no chrétienté has been exempt from vexation. Nevertheless the majority have been left intact from all acts of superstition, in return for a pecuniary transaction.\(^{103}\)

But not all were exempt from unrelenting abuse. Larger events in early 1847 dragged the mission into a series of disasters. In April 1847, after French ships destroyed fortifications in Đà Nẵng. Adding to the already highly maligned profile Catholics, rumour spread through the military and in official circles that the defeat at Đà Nẵng had been the fault of a treacherous Vietnamese naval captain, allegedly a Catholic. According to Miche, the accusation heightened the vilification of Catholics and renewed sanctioned violence against chrétientés.\(^{104}\)

In response to the French attack, the court ordered a new wave of searches throughout the region. Officials not only searched villages but as a test ordered Catholic communities to erect shrines as per royal edict issued under Minh Mạng. The majority of villages were left intact and not affected by the searches thanks to the use of mission funds. Yet the exploitation became increasingly insatiable. Miche claimed a chrétienté which had “bought its liberty from a sub-prefect for the sum of 600 francs, was visited three days later by the same sub-prefect and forced to erect an altar to ancestors”, that is a state-cult shrine. Another village was visited “up to three times by a canton head, and each time paid out a contribution”. He was also aware of a household that had dispensed the equivalent of 1000fr, around 12 taels of silver, to avoid “the communal disaster of the village”, but it nevertheless was forced by the extortionists to suffer the same fate as the rest of the community.\(^{105}\)

\(^{102}\) Following his rescue by the French Navy in 1843, Miche returned to Cochinchina in February 1845 where he assumed duties in the south.

\(^{103}\) Miche, *AMEP* 755, 27/12/1847, no.31.

\(^{104}\) Miche, *AMEP* 755, 27/12/1847, no.31.

\(^{105}\) Ibid. *AMEP* 755, 2/2/1847, no.18.
Responding to Crisis: The 1840s Mission Reforms in Cochinchina

A similar campaign swept through Phú Yên province in late 1846. At first, instead of ordering officials to make village-to-village searches, the Governor-general ordered all village heads to report centrally on the status of their respective communities. Alexis Barbier claimed that when officials resorted to village and house-to-house searches in the province, instead of attempting to pay-off district magistrates and canton officials, some communities simply dispersed, and many villagers fled west into the mountains to avoid the threat. Villages were searched, and as a test, officials ordered Catholic communities to erect shrines to the state cult.106

V. Conclusion

The infiltration of new mission activities coincided with court anti-Catholic measures and together the two produced new ground for negotiation and interaction between Catholic and non-Catholic communities, and authorities. However, in the process, it contributed and strengthened an insidious culture of bribery and extortion. In the short term, uneven relationships developed between local officials and chrétientés and the mission, thus exploitation occurred infrequently. By the mid-1840s, the arrival of increased allocations from abroad fed local greed and encouraged exploitation. The practice developed into an economy, whereby security from the threat of violence could be bought by local Catholics and the mission. Although the funds afforded the mission a loose insurance against threat, the certainty of successfully bribing officials became increasingly unpredictable. This situation worsened and became entrenched by the late 1840s. Over the longer term, bribery and extortion became a common ground through which the mission and Catholic society interacted with other sections of society, local officials, non-Catholics and fellow villagers, criminals and opportunists.

106 Barbier, AMEP 750 1/11/1847, no.27.
In the aftermath of Thiệu Trị’s death in November 1847 power at court shifted to a powerful faction headed by Trương Đăng Quế, who, along with three other officials, supervised the succession. While the chronicles for this critical period project a vision of stability and order, the selection of prince Hồng Nhâm over the elder, more obvious heir, Hồng Bào, as Bùi Quang Tùng has illustrated, arose through careful manipulation. The choice, while prudent in light of the contemporary turmoil, was followed by a nearly catastrophic deterioration in order and rule throughout the kingdom. To many living around the capital rumours linked the unusual circumstances of the succession directly to a number of ensuing catastrophes. Shortly after the Trữ Đức investiture by a Chinese embassy in September 1849 – the first to be staged in Huế – a cholera epidemic swept across the kingdom. As it spread, devastating whole communities, popular perception linked its onset to the departure of the embassy in October 1849, casting grave doubts on the mandate of the new king. The ensuing famine further exacerbated the dynasty’s and the kingdom’s worst epidemic in thirty years. Compounding the catalogue of disasters, banditry and piracy spread in the north and south, regions distant from the capital, and remained unchecked by provincial authorities. Within the capital’s walls, no sooner had the succession secured Hồng Nhâm’s position then

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2 The reign of a king began on the first day of the lunar new year. In this case, Thiệu Trị died on 4 November 1847, prince Hồng Nhâm ascended the throne on 20 December, but his reign did not begin until 5 February 1848.
3 Retord, letter extract dated 2 May 1850, APF XXIII, 1851, p.270, 278.
conspiracies mounted. Indicative of factional infighting, the supplanted party, Hồng Bào, plotted to overthrow his younger sibling. While the number of coups launched is unclear, an 1851 attempt ended in failure and resulted in Hồng Bào’s imprisonment in a private compound. The virtual omission of detail on the whole affair in the Nguyễn chronicles underscores the controversy.

The great instability of the early Tự Đức reign, as much an immediate consequence of French naval aggression as of internal instabilities within court circles, draws our attention to the emergence of two distortions in state-society relations arising from Minh Mạng’s centralisation reforms. At court, the succession led by the Trường Đằng Quê faction represented the culmination of nearly a generation of selectivity in senior official appointments at court and in the bureaucracy. A beneficiary himself of Nguyễn favouritism for supporters and family from areas neighbouring Huế and its former dynastic cradle of Thanh-Nghê-Tĩnh, Regent Quê had been the chief official presiding over the palace examinations during the 1840s. He oversaw to the disproportionate rise of graduates from the traditional Đặng Trong provinces – Quảng Bình south – at the expense of candidates from Bắc Kỳ. This bias towards candidates from the old Thuận Hòa area of Đặng Trong and the Huế examination site in particular, translated to preferred appointments within the uppermost, court-based positions in the bureaucracy. This had a number of consequences on social elites and communities elsewhere in the kingdom.

In Bắc Kỳ in particular, it further exacerbated decades of simmering resentment over Nguyễn political discrimination. Together with Huế’s denial of the Lê heritage and pre-Nguyễn scholarship, tensions reached boiling point in the early 1850s, precipitating

4 Galy, letter extract dated 15 January 1852, APF 1853, pp.35-37.
5 The only entry noting the counter-coup in 1854, which recorded that the prince had committed suicide in his prison (DNTL XXVIII, p.9). Indeed, despite his status as Thiệu Trị’s eldest son, Hồng Bào received only several short lines in the official biographies, merely an acknowledgment of his existence (LT III, p.153).
6 Indeed, born in Quang Ngai, Quê’s ancestors were from Hà Tĩnh, see his entry in LT III, p.392.
8 Cooke, “Southern Regionalism and the Composition of the Nguyen Ruling Elite”, p.222. Efforts were made to rectify the examination bias in the early Tự Đức reign. However, as Cooke has suggested, the long term discrimination might explain the loss of interest among northern scholars for the metropolitan exams, particularly those from proud scholarly heritage, Cooke, “Nineteenth-Century Vietnamese Confucianization in Historical Perspective: Evidence from the Palace Examinations (1463-1883)”, JSEAS 25, 2 (Sept. 1994), p.311-12.
a succession of uprisings led by Lê restorationists. While in the Six Provinces, the previous two decades of centralisation had led to greater assimilation of this region, both socially and bureaucratically. Cultural policies, land reform, and the fostering of an élite strata of landed gentry and Confucian educated officials had ensured greater uniformity in the exercise of central rule down to the district level. However, in this sparsely settled frontier region, communities still by and large lived according to entrenched local patterns.

As seen in the previous chapter, Cuenot’s reform of mission structures to meet the hostile conditions in Vietnam reaped immediate dividends in conversions and the expansion of Church influence in the vicariate. These reforms, a direct response to Nguyễn anti-Catholic hostility, influenced other subtle undercurrents taking shape in grassroots society in the south at the time. Following on from earlier discussion of the mission consolidation in Cochinchina, this chapter explores the emergence of a wider community consciousness in local Catholic society. While a close examination of grassroots perceptions is limited by the depth of mission sources, new opportunities in clerical education from the 1840s together with the rising influence of the local clergy in mission activity provide important clues to understanding the indigenisation of Church structures in this period. Indigenisation not only entailed the mission’s greater dependence on priests for the day-to-day administration of the vicariate, it saw an expansion of cultural activity and interaction in a variety of areas.

I. A Frontier of Beliefs

If we return briefly to court policies and measures in this period, in the first years of the Tự Đức reign the circulation and spread of heterodox practices was very much an issue of serious concern in the administration of key areas on the periphery, especially on the southwest frontier with Cambodia. In mid-1848, the issue of a code of decrees authored by senior ministers Nguyễn Dăng Giai, Tôn Thất Bật and Nguyễn Văn Chán, inaugurated governing attitudes for the reign. The range of issues considered in the thirteen-point edict provides an indication of the court’s priorities and concerns.

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10 DNTL XXVII, pp.109-12.
The tenth decree of the code, “regarding the granting of status to spirits”,\(^\text{11}\) exhorted villages to comply with the honouring of spirits, whether of the “walls and moats” type or specially recognised powerful spirits (than hồi địch xác), unless formal court recognition had not yet been granted. This matter refers to Minh Mạng’s 1839 edict regarding the construction of village level shrines to the “spirit for walls and moats” (thần thành hoàng). Recognising the slow process of granting a spirit to every village, this decree firmly reminded low-level officials that compliance to state-sanctioned observance was still expected in all communities.\(^{12}\) This reminder, a reflection of the enormous effort required to implement such a measure, was followed by an extensive issue of spirit certifications. According to Langlet, some thirteen thousand certifications were issued during the Tự Đức reign, of which 8556 were declared for villages from Quảng Trị province north, 1766 alone for the small capital province of Thừa-Thiên and 2747 for villages from Quảng Nam south.\(^\text{13}\) This mass-issuie of spirit certification was part of a larger process of consolidating the symbols of central rule down to the village level. Crucially, as the 1848 decree shows, instead of ordering the uniform construction of a spirit of walls and moats temple in each village some locally recognised spirits could be granted the same status and were used to fulfil the same needs.\(^{14}\) This measure indicates the value placed on strengthening centrally organised networks of power relations. It also refers indirectly to the urgent matter of mission activity in the kingdom.

In decree twelve, “regarding the proscription of the religion of Jesus”,\(^\text{15}\) the court outlined a series of new and severe measures to curb the spread of Catholicism.\(^\text{16}\) Firstly, for the capture of a foreign “leader of the religion” it offered the unprecedented reward of 300 taels of silver, a tenfold increase on rewards granted under Minh Mạng and Thiệu Trị. This stellar rise, indicative of a bidding competition between the court and the mission, is an affirmation of Huế’s knowledge that rising mission funds had deeply affected its ability to enforce the anti-Catholic measures. Also, no longer would

\(^{11}\) “Về việc phong tặng các thần kỵ”.
\(^{12}\) MMCY III, p.215.
\(^{13}\) Philippe Langlet, L’Ancienne Historiographie d’État au Vietnam (Paris: EFE0, 1990), p.86.
\(^{14}\) Ibid., pp.86-87.
\(^{15}\) “Về điều cấm đạo Gia-Tô”.
\(^{16}\) DNTL XXVII, p.111.
missionaries be released as they had under Thiệu Trị. As soon as interrogation had taken place, mission captives were to be executed and their remains thrown into the sea.

As for local priests and converts, the court moved to a more aggressive attitude in meting out punishments. Since the early days of the proscription in the 1830s, Catholics' demands to suffer execution had been a serious problem. In 1837, Minh Mạng recalled with disgust the resolve of an elderly woman of Dương Xuân village (neighbouring Huế) who, having refused to recant, demanded to be executed. Threatened with trampling by elephants and beheading she had still insisted, probably to the great dismay of the mandarin in charge. Minh Mạng commented it was "confirmation that the religion of the lord of heaven (đạo thiên chúa) was so completely mesmerising". In the late 1830s and throughout the 1840s, the court had executed dozens of priests, but instead of having the desired effect of deterring people from joining the religion, the executions had attracted large crowds of onlookers eager to souvenir the victim's blood, even scraping up drops that had fallen on grass. Moreover, possibly because most viewed the execution of Catholics as excessive and unjust, the belief that neophytes embodied a powerful spiritual agency was widely accepted. As more and more Catholics, particularly priests, quietly refused to recant and willingly faced execution, the court recognised the subversive potential and sought to neutralise the mission's power to mobilise what it might have perceived as public sympathy. At their arrest and trial, priests and defiant converts were to be exhorted to recant. For those who refused, and local priests who demanded to be executed, the decree ordered each to be tattooed on the face the characters of the religion, Gia Tô. Afterwards, convicts were to be dispersed among mainstream communities.

While the substance of this edict focused on the bureaucracy and dealt with issues like the review of village registers, further land clearing for settlement and the recruitment of militia from villages. In essence, it characterised a decisive response to the crisis posed by perceived external threats. Although most decrees addressed the kingdom's internal affairs, the nature of the adjustments it detailed was designed to consolidate control at the weakest point of rule.

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17 DNTL XIX, p.250.
18 The decree does not explicitly state that "Gia Tô" should be tattooed, but the context makes it clear that these were the required characters.
19 The decree cites "registered subjects", số dân.
The acuteness of Nguyễn concern for Catholicism’s subversive nature is further seen in a memorial appearing in late 1848 on the presence of missionaries in Cambodia. In this memorial, the geographic context of the limits of Huế rule is expressed not only through the expression of anger at the newly invested – and Huế-sponsored – Cambodian king, but through the mission’s ability to circulate throughout the wider region. In December, Hà Tiên’s Governor, Nguyễn Bá Nghi, reported that the king of Cambodia, Ang Duong (Ong Giun), had been harbouring missionaries and assisting their entry into the Six Provinces. In response, the Secret Council (Cơ mật viện) ordered that all provincial executives in the south undertake wide searches to record all “villages and hamlets” with Catholics or which had hidden a “leader of the religion”. Although concerned with the porous Cambodian frontier, this memorial focuses on the spread of proscribed practices into the kingdom. Less than two years earlier, in 1846, the arrest of Mgr. Lefèbvre and the execution of Lê Văn Gâm, the ship captain who had transported the missionary to Gia Định, had provoked the court’s anger at local associations with foreign missionaries and, more seriously, at the participation of Catholics in the mission’s inter-regional networks. The court understood well that the mission threat was located outside the kingdom, in Macao, Cambodia and, a little further abroad, in Penang. In fact, shortly before his death in November 1847, according to Miehe, Thiệu Trị ordered the dispatch of officials and interpreters on four ships to travel to the regional centres of Singapore and Malacca to gather intelligence on French intentions, and to make a trip to Penang, where the MEP’s regional seminary was based.

Not necessarily focused on geographic frontiers, the edict’s principal concern was the socio-cultural frontier of the village, below the formal reach of direct bureaucratic control. On one level, the issues addressed by both of these edicts demonstrate the court’s attempt to reinvigorate the centralising momentum initiated under Minh Mạng. As seen most clearly in the reference to village worship, Huế sought to shore up its representation at the lowest levels of society in face of greater external threat from French and European aggression. However, on another level, the issue of harsh measures directed at Catholics illustrates the degree to which the mission presence

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20 DNTL XXVII, p.144.
21 However, the mission was aborted shortly after news reached Gia Định – where the ships had assembled – of the king’s death, Miche, AMEP 755, 27/12/1847, no.31. Unfortunately this mission is not recorded in the Veritable Records.
Catholicism’s Alternative Paths: Local Leaders, the Priesthood and the Mandarinate

had grown as a priority. Under Minh Mạng(189,77),(251,93), Marchand’s alleged involvement in the Gia Định rebellion had inflamed court animosity, but in the 1830s Catholicism, I suggested in chapter two, constituted a symbolic threat. The spread of mission activities and the increased French naval activity in the 1840s saw to a fundamental shift in court perceptions. Following the Lapierre attack at Đà Nẵng in 1847, Catholicism became a real and imminent threat to stability in the kingdom.

II. Leadership in the Mission

Restricted by the punitive measures of the Minh Mạng(263,40),(322,57) and Thiệu Trị anti-Catholic campaigns, by the mid-1840s the mission had become wholly dependent on local communities. Foreign missionaries needed local intermediaries to conduct negotiations between communities and authorities for mission security. This coincided with other administrative adjustments, in particular the division of the Cochinchina vicariate. The first major change occurred in 1845 with the creation of East and West Cochinchina. This was followed in 1850 with the creation of two further divisions, one encompassing Cambodia and Laos, and another for North Cochinchina. These extra divisions, it was hoped, would both help the MEP capitalise on the new enthusiasm and funding opportunities flowing from Europe and, on the ground in the mission, enable a sharing of responsibility for the administration of the local Church. Instead of having one apostolic vicar responsible for a vast territory, several mutually supporting centres could lessen the damage caused in the event of the death or capture of senior clergy.

The reforms had wide ranging consequences, not least of which was the diminished role of French missionaries in day-to-day affairs. The division of the vicariates fitted Cuenot’s aims of expanding the local clergy and shifting the difficulties of administration to local Church organisation. Where once missionaries had control over chrétienté administration, from the 1840s lay leaders and priests had assumed greater authority, and in this period, the power relations between missionaries and priests, however briefly, reversed in favour of the local clergy. For the first time in the history of the mission, local priests held positions of authority parallel to those of missionaries. While this authority would not last into the colonial regime in the 1860s,

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22 The Cambodia vicariate was carved from the southernmost and western areas of West Cochinchina. North Cochinchina covered the three northern metropolitan provinces from Huế to Quảng Bình.
at the time it created new terms of understanding between local priests and missionaries. It also provided a variety of new opportunities.

In contrast to earlier decades, mission practice now tended towards maintaining fewer missionaries in established areas. For much of the 1850s, only two missionaries, Borelle and Mgr. Lefèbvre, administered the West Cochinchina Vicariate. Shortly after the subdivisions, and illustrating the changing shape of mission relationships, Miehe warned that the mission risked becoming a victim of its own success and arrogance.

The indigenous clergy multiplies before our eyes in a number of missions, above all in that of Cochinchina, you will find before long more subjects that have no need for the missions that have no other resource than European priests. In the missions, Europeans will not only be of no use, since they are unable to attend to administration but they would be a burden, because they expose the xtiëntës, where they are, to affronts.23

Too much mission interference risked burdening communities which, over the previous decade, had become increasingly self-sufficient, a problem made sharply apparent by the behaviour of some inexperienced missionaries. Earlier Miehe had described how two newly arrived clerics, Pères Bouillevaux and Cordier, seriously upset communities by coming and going as they saw fit. Borelle, based in the large Vinh Long chrétienté of Cái Mon, had written to Miehe about these strained relationships, reporting that “neither domestic nor Mass servants” would stay with Bouillevaux because he behaved in such a “severe” manner towards them. Cordier was guilty of similar behaviour.24

Cuenot’s reforms had brought immediate dividends in terms of rates of conversions, increased security of chrétientës and the expansion of the mission. Each of these achievements, resulting from the consolidation of the Vietnamese priesthood, had shifted the concentration of clerical responsibilities from missionaries to local priests and lay leaders, known as “catechists”. Mission experiences in communities illustrate a diversity of relationships between priests, missionaries and chrétientës modelled on local perceptions of headship.

Alain Forest suggests that the organisation of a catechist corp in Tonkin was derived from Jesuit experiences in Japan in which priests, following Buddhist models,
employed *dojuku*, or a “novice” to undertake lay instruction duties.²⁵ As in earlier decades, catechists in the 1840s were divided into different classes according to seniority and responsibilities.²⁶ Lefèbvre’s annual catalogue for 1850 outlines the work and roles of two different classes of catechists. The first class, he reported, “are young men … capable of instructing catechumens, children and ignorant Christians.”²⁷ Numbering twelve for West Cochinchina in 1850, the mission employed these lay leaders to travel “from one side [of the vicariate] to the other to where they can be of most use.”

A second more general class was composed of “fathers of families who have some influence in their Chrétienté.” The role of these catechists was suitably broad:

[T]heir function is to see to good order, to settle differences, to preside over gatherings and marriages which are performed in the absence of a priest, to procure the relief of the sacraments for the ill and to be present in their last hour; in a word to replace a priest as far as their circumstances permit them.

Lefèbvre added that there were in total around 300 in this class of catechists, of which he counted only 78 as being of “some use”.²⁸ These leaders represented a more localised model of Catholic leadership, tuned to the pragmatic side of maintaining the Church organisation.

Catechists assumed a variety of responsibilities and roles within communities. Indeed, the term “catechist” does not appear to have a close equivalent in vernacular Vietnamese. To denote catechists, the Nguyễn chronicles, perhaps borrowing a contemporary expression from the Middle Kingdom, refer generally to *giáo truờng* or “leaders of teaching”.²⁹ But in chrétientés, the most commonly used address would have been the respectful *thầy*, which may be translated as “master” or “teacher”. As we see in Borelle’s reports on his congregations in the Mekong delta, local Church leaders were not called “catechists” but instead held titles reflecting village structures of authority, such as *ông trium*, “village head”, or *ông câu* or *cà*, “elderly notable”.³⁰ Although

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²⁷ Lefèbvre, *AMEP 755*, no.54.
²⁸ Ibid.
²⁹ DNTL XX, p.120.
³⁰ Borelle, *AMEP 755*, 21/07/1853, no.75; *AMEP 755*, 26/07/1855 no.88; and, *AMEP 755*, 22/10/1855, no.90.
Catholicism’s Alternative Paths: Local Leaders, the Priesthood and the Mandarinate

Lefèbvre referred to the formal roles of catechists according to their grades, communities viewed teachers and ecumenical leaders according to existing cultural models.

The example of Simon Hòa, the elderly doctor of Dương Sơn village near Huế at the end of the 1830s, demonstrates the flexibility of roles in local leadership. A prominent doctor, respected village elder and scholar, Hòa was also involved in instructing neophytes. But leadership entailed other aspects. Alongside medical skill, wealth also played an important role in prestige. In contrast to the situation near Huế, with Simon Hòa’s prestige based on medical skills, chrétienté heads in the Mekong area may have comprised a small class of landed gentry with regional ties and probably good commercial prospects. Reporting on a “disagreement with a chrétienté chief” in a letter from 1839, Jeanne, based in the Mekong, reported that the dispute had only emerged after the Catholic elder had built him a “large house”, and insisted he accept it for his residence. Shortly before his arrest with Philippe Minh in 1853 “Ông trùm Lưu” – Joseph Lưu – the chrétienté head of Mạc Bác, Vĩnh Long province, had donated land for the construction of a chapel, a nhà phước, or “house for the faithful”. In his account of Lưu’s execution, Borelle claimed that the notable was well-respected not only by his Catholic neighbours but also by other pagans, “Annamite or Cambodian”. Lưu helped his neighbours when their fields were flooded, and when he “did not have the strength [to act himself], gave advice to the property owner” on a variety of matters. It was because of this generosity, Borelle added, that Lưu had “amassed a fortune”. Similarly, Lê Văn Phượng – Emmanuel Phượng – a “grand Catechist”, won prestige in the mixed Catholic and non-Catholic community of Đâu Nước due to his generosity.

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32 The possibility of regional differences in catechist status may be confirmed with further research. Briefly, Galy, an MEP missionary in the Tonkin, provides a glimpse of local perceptions and suggests a model of leadership closely resembling the corporate leadership of northern villages. Describing the conditions of a chrétienté in his district he reported on elderly “catechists” remissicing on earlier lay leaders. With little respect for the current generation, contemporary leaders looked back at the forbears as “men of consumate wisdom and prudence, [who] were feared and respected like little kings” (Galy, letter extract dated 15 January 1852 in APF XXV (1853), p.30).
34 See Borelle, AMEP 755, 21/07/1855, no.75; and, Matthieu Dác, Hạnh Cha MINH và Lại Gẩm Tư đạo là hai vị A THÀNH thứ nhất Địa phận Nam Kỳ [Dear victims of the religion Father Minh and pilot Gám the first two martyrs of Cochinchina] (Saigon: Imprimerie de la Mission à Tân Định, 1902), p.19-20.
36 Borelle, AMEP 755, no.181, (written in 1860).
Borelle described him as an elderly man of 63, with a “large family and [who] enjoyed an honest fortune”. As a leader, Phùng put his money to good use for the mission, building a Church, which stood in full view “to all eyes on the [Mekong] river”, a “convent for the daughters of Mary”, and a college. These deeds were also listed by the local mandarinate in Phùng’s lengthy execution sentence.

The scope of responsibilities and social roles illustrated by these examples demonstrates the centrality of local perceptions of prestige, an element effectively exploited by the mission. Of the diverse elements dominating the cultural role of “catechist”, seniority in age, personal wealth, and medical or healing skills were paramount.

III. Catholic Literature in the 1840s

Literary knowledge played an important and distinguishing role in leadership. As Lefèbvre noted, the key distinction between “first” and “second class” catechists was the devotion to ecclesiastic duties, including devotion to studying Latin and theology. “First class” catechists, young men with some education at one of the mission’s colleges, were expected to remain celibate and to accompany missionaries or local priests on pastoral visits. It was from this group that the mission selected candidates for the priesthood who, increasingly from the early 1840s, were sent overseas for training at the Collège Générale in Penang.

Before 1841 most students studied within the vicariate, at either the seminary in Lái Thiệu near Biên Hòa, or in Như Lý outside Huế. Some seminarians had enjoyed the privilege of travelling broad, a consequential benefit of having fled the vicariate with French missionaries after 1832. After the Gò Thị Synod and Cuenot’s reforms, concerted effort was made to send students abroad to a safer environment to finish theological studies. The Collège, established in the late seventeenth century in Ayudyha in Siam by the founding Vicar Apostolic of the region, Mgr. De la Motte Lambert, had trained seminarians from throughout the region, including Siam, Tonkin, Cochinchina.

37 Ibid.
38 According to Borelle’s translation, the sentence accused Phùng:

“of being a sectarian of the perverse religion ... had in possession books of the religion and objects of the cult ... had built a church and there gathered people for prophesying and praying, he had dared to offer safety to a master of the religion ... he refuses obstinately to renounce the religion. As a consequence we declare that Lê Văn Phùng is a rebel at which the law orders that he be strangled without remission.”

Borelle, AMEP 755, no.181.
Catholicism’s Alternative Paths: Local Leaders, the Priesthood and the Mandarinate

and southern China. Having fled Siam after the 1767 fall of Ayudhya, the Collège moved to Hà Tiên and then to India, before the MEP re-established it in Penang in 1808. However, it was not until the 1830s brought extra funding from the Society for the Propagation of the Faith that the college had the capacity to accept large numbers of regional seminarians. On average each vicariate funded the travel and expenses of four to six students to Penang annually, or around ten to twelve students from the Cochinchina region.

From the early 1840s on, the programme achieved huge success. Compared to Régéreau’s annual report for 1835, which recorded only nineteen local priests for the whole of Cochinchina, Champa and Cambodia, by 1847 East Cochinchina alone maintained twenty-one local clergy while West Cochinchina had eleven, a total of thirty two. The significance of this rise is most apparent when placed in the context of the corresponding rise in conversions at over 500 neophytes per annum throughout the 1840s. As we saw in the previous chapter, the rise of conversions came as a result of intensive instruction. However, the role of lay leaders and local clergy as teachers and scholars must also be recognised. In fact, in the absence of a large French missionary presence in society, the increasing conversion rate raises questions about the greater appeal of local priests and catechists as spiritual leaders.

The biography of Philippe Phan Văn Minh, published in 1902 on the occasion of his beatification, reveals several clues on local perceptions of priests and illustrates the attractiveness of the priesthood as a path of advancement for young Catholic men during the period. Born in 1815 to Catholic parents in the large chrétienté of Cái Mon, Vinh Long province, Phan Văn Minh’s was raised during the generally tolerant Gia Long reign and its immediate aftermath. At that time, diverse religious communities

40 Lefèvre, AMEP 755, 1855, no.83.
43 One of the most telling features of the times in Minh’s biography is the high infant mortality rate in his family. The twelfth child of fourteen, Minh was one of seven children who survived past the age of twenty. Indeed, Minh’s parents, Dominico Phan Văn Đức, a chretiené notable (câu họ) and therefore probably a catechist, and Anna Tiêu, died when he was young, Matthieu Đức, Hạnh Cha MINH và Lái Gân Tư đạo là hai vị A THÁNH thu pérdida Día phạn Nam Kỳ [Dear victims of the religion Father Minh
flourished in the Mekong and Đồng Nai regions and, from the mid-1820s, foreign clergy made regular pastoral visits to the region’s numerous chrétientés. It was on such a visit to Cái Mon in 1828 that Minh, recently orphaned and only around 13 years old, requested to be taken into the care of Mgr. Taberd.\textsuperscript{44} Minh, who had apparently shown potential in his schooling in Chinese characters,\textsuperscript{45} was accepted as a mission novice and returned with the cleric to the seminary at Lái Thiều.

By this stage court hostility to the mission led to the proscription of Catholicism. In 1833, Taberd ordered the Lái Thiều college to disperse and then, along with a number of other French missionaries, fled the region. Minh and a number of students accompanied the group to Penang, where they continued their studies at the Collège Générale. In the mid-1830s, and still only in his early twenties, Minh was identified as a talented linguist and travelled to Pondicherry to assist Taberd with the publication of a Latin-Vietnamese dictionary.\textsuperscript{46} In 1840, when Taberd passed away, Minh returned to Penang. After the division of the Cochinchina vicariate in late 1845, he was recalled to join the growing local clergy, returning to Vietnam after over a decade’s absence. In 1846, at thirty-one years of age, he was ordained by Cuenot and assigned responsibility for a number of communities in the Mekong.

Over the following years Minh travelled widely through the delta region, administering the growing number of chrétientés scattered from Thậu Râu (present day Cầu Ngang) at the Cung Hậu mouth of the Mekong, to Đậu Nuốc,\textsuperscript{47} on Cù Lao Gieng island in the upper Mekong close to the modern day Cambodian border. In February 1853, his good fortune in avoiding the attention of regional authorities. Visiting Mạc Bác chrétienté – where Marchand was courted by Lê Văn Khôi’s deputation in 1833 – Minh fell victim to a villager’s desperate attempt to earn a reward for his capture. Arrested with the chrétienté head, Joseph Lữ, he was executed in mid-1854.\textsuperscript{48}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{44} Known in the text as Đức Cha Tú.\textsuperscript{45} The biography notes “chữ nhỏ”, which may be translated as classical letters, or Confucian studies, referring specifically to administrative Chinese. But it is certain that Minh also studied chữ nôm, the demotic Vietnamese script used widely at the time in local literature.\textsuperscript{46} Taberd, Dictionarium latino-anamiticum (Serampore [Singapore], 1838).\textsuperscript{47} Also referred to as Cù Lao Gieng.\textsuperscript{48} Matthieu Đức, Hành Cha MINH và Lái Gấm Tú đạo là hai vị A THÁNH thụ nhất Địa phận Nam Kỳ [Dear victims of the religion Father Minh and pilot Gấm the first two martyrs of Cochinchina] (Saigon: Imprimerie de la Mission à Tân Định, 1902), p.19-20.}
Catholicism’s Alternative Paths: Local Leaders, the Priesthood and the Mandarinate

Minh embodied the best qualities of being a gifted scholar in vernacular characters (chữ nôm) and a competent student in Latin, qualities which enhanced and elevated the role of clergy in local perceptions. The attractiveness of the vocation can be seen in the rise of student numbers in the period. Cuenot’s annual report for 1845, for example, noted three colleges in East Cochinchina supporting around thirty students, twelve of whom were attached as minor clerics to missionaries.49 The report added that an astounding sixty-four students were currently in Penang.50 On finances, his 1847 annual report recorded that 1,000fr had been used for the maintenance of thirty students, a substantial sum considering a similar amount was allocated to maintain twenty-one local priests. By then the number of students at the Collège Générale had leapt to seventy-two.51 Lefèbvre’s reports, although less detailed than Cuenot’s for this period, recorded two colleges in West Cochinchina – one in Thị Nghè near Saigon and another in Cái Mon – and a total of forty students within the mission for 1852.52 These figures were large relative to the size of Catholic communities in Cochinchina but paled by comparison to those of the Tonkin missions. For instance, Retord reported in 1847 that the combined missions in the north fielded some ninety-one local priests, with a further three hundred students of Latin dispersed among six local colleges.53

Penang was not simply a refuge for mission students and MEP missionaries, it was both an institute of learning and a site of cultural interaction. Men from all over the Asia region, from Vietnam, Siam, southern China, Korea, Cambodia and India, attended. A consideration of the specific institutional aims of the programme for sending young men to the Collège Générale in Penang draws attention to the MEP’s underlying assumptions and ambitions in training local clergy at a single site. An observation from the 1847 annual Lettre Commune, sent to apostolic vicars throughout the region embodied MEP perceptions.

It is the experience that these young men shaped and disciplined by Europeans, far from their land of birth, little by little lose the taint (rouille) of their national prejudices, the sphere of their ideas broaden, and they easily adopt our ideas and views. Returning to their land after robust study, they will be able, after some

49 One near Huế, one in Quâng Nam province and the third at Gò Thị.
50 Cuenot, “Cochinchine Orientale, 1845”, AMEP 750, no. 9.
51 Cuenot, “Cochinchine Orientale”, AMEP 750, no.34.
years of experience, to fill an important post, be it in the exercise of the ministry, [or] in the direction of local seminaries.\textsuperscript{54}

Along with its hopes of ensuring ideological orthodoxy throughout the ranks of the local clergy, the MEP also aimed to create a culturally homogenous generation of men, loyal to French Catholic ideals. It should also be added that from the 1840s, for the first time, training included instruction in the French language. The MEP’s long term goal was the establishment of self-sufficient local Churches and clerical hierarchies governed by indigenous bishops. Yet such an achievement was just as unlikely in the racially conscious nineteenth-century Catholic Church as was the probability of local priests wholly adopting the MEP worldview.\textsuperscript{55} Certainly numbers of Penang-trained clergy did indeed adopt MEP and European views; but the range of experiences available at Penang was diverse. As I discuss later, while some MEP graduates later worked within the French colonial regime, still others turned their backs on the mission and put their knowledge of European ideas to the service of the dynasty.

There is of course little value in contrasting the number of Penang graduates and Latin students supported by the mission to the thousands of young men competing for entry into the Nguyễn bureaucracy. In fact, such a contrast would only confirm the overwhelming preference for official channels of advance. Although the mandarinate was apparently the most tangible road to personal prestige, authority and status, 1840s and 1850s sensibilities need to be considered. In a cultural environment that discriminated against certain communities and religious groups, the Nguyễn bureaucracy and education system represented the dominant, but not the only path open at the time. That young Vietnamese men like Philippe Minh were prepared to seek out and, where necessary, compete to access an illicit education path involving travel to a foreign land far from family for at least seven years at a time, and requiring they study the classical language of a foreign culture, calls our attention to the unique circumstances of the endeavour. It also prompts us to take a different approach to the cultural assumptions motivating young men to pursue careers in the priesthood.


\textsuperscript{55} The first Vietnamese Bishop was not named until 1933, an achievement following decades of political struggle between local priests and French missionaries.
The training of large numbers of Vietnamese seminarians in Penang undoubtedly had wider implications. For example, the gathering of young men from different regions of Vietnam – and wider Asia – in itself is a significant feature, and strongly suggests that the experience contributed to the promotion of a community consciousness among Vietnamese Catholics. Moreover, the flow through Penang of literate men from a variety of different regions, well before the modern era of mass-education and communication, raises interesting questions on the types of changes such interaction might have had on vernacular Vietnamese. We cannot assume that Vietnamese from different regions in the mid-nineteenth century easily understood each other except in a general way because of dialectic differences.\textsuperscript{56} While developments in the Vietnamese language through the Penang seminary would have been modest in the 1840s and 1850s, such efforts undoubtedly laid the foundation for interregional linguistic endeavours in later generations. Although seminarians represented a small group of students in the context of the broader Vietnamese speaking population, the influence of priests on Catholic communities was significant. One development of lasting significance during the 1840s and 1850s was the spread of Catholic literature.

IV. The Martyrdom of Philippe Minh: Propaganda and Language

Philippe Minh’s story not only provides insights into the career of Vietnamese Catholics under the Nguyễn dynasty, it also draws our attention to one of the most important developments in which local priests were intimately involved in the nineteenth-century, the promotion of vernacular Vietnamese literature. Minh’s involvement in particular is special. Not only was he a proponent of Catholic literature, but through his fate he became one of its prominent subjects. In fact, a close look at the transmission of his biography from the 1850s to the colonial era holds some interesting clues regarding spread of local literature.

Shortly after Minh’s execution in Vĩnh Long in 1853, Borelle and Lefèbvre collected accounts of the event and details of his life and family for an official account – “Relation” – to support an application for his beatification. In addition, they drew on personal letters written by Minh from prison shortly before his execution. First, Borelle and Lefèbvre composed lengthy “Relations” in French and Latin and sent these to the

\textsuperscript{56} I would like to acknowledge Philip Taylor for his suggestions on this section, personal communication, 16 December 2003.
MEP in Paris for publication in the *Annals for the Propagation of the Faith*. But this was not the only language and format in which the story was transmitted. The publication of another account in *quốc ngữ* in 1902 by Father Matthêu Đức, a Saigon priest, alerts us to the proliferation of a little-studied genre of Catholic literature. A reference in the foreword to letters written by Minh whilst in prison provides important details for the story’s transmission from the 1850s to the colonial period. Đức explained that shortly after the first edition of the story – published in 1900 – he came across a version of a poem “The Story of the Martyr Father Minh”, *Truyện Cha Minh Tự Đạo*, which an elderly gentleman, “ông chính Hòa”, had recorded at some point in earlier decades. It was to Hòa that Minh apparently addressed his letters from prison; the same letters apparently used by Borelle and Lefèbvre. Unfortunately, Đức did not reproduce Hòa’s copy of the story in his 1902 edition, but it is certain that this vision was dated from the pre-colonial period and may have been composed in verse. More importantly, Matthêu Đức’s reference to Hòa’s text suggests an under-explored genealogy of pre-colonial Catholic literature, which I will explore in the following discussion.

To begin with, it is worth briefly revisiting Minh’s involvement in the preparation of Mgr. Taberd’s Latin and Vietnamese lexicon, *Dictionarium latino-anamiticum*, first published in Singapore in 1838. Along with this project, which was itself a lightly edited reproduction of Pigneaux’ handwritten manuscript for a Latin-Vietnamese lexicon, collated in 1772, Minh appears to have made some contribution to several others produced by the cleric, including a geographic note on Cochinchina. But it is in the dictionary annex that we find what may have been Minh’s most important input, the introductory stanzas of the story of an earlier victim of anti-Catholic hostilities, the “Martyrdom of Agnes”, *Inê Tự Đạo*. This poem recounts the

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58 Matthêu Đức, *Hành Cha MINH và Lời Gán Tự đạo*.
59 Ibid., pp.V-VI.
61 Taberd, *Dictionarium latino-anamiticum* (Serampore [Singapore], 1838); Jean Louis Taberd, “Note on the Geography of Cochin China”, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, vol. 6, 1837, pp.737-45.
arrest and death by starvation in prison of Agnes, the sister of a priest from Điện-Ninh prefecture, the administrative precursor for Khánh Hòa province. According to Võ Long Tế, it was composed in the period in which the events took place, the Minh Vương (r.1691-1725) persecution of 1700.\textsuperscript{63} In the dictionary annex, the poem appeared in four languages, English, French, Latin and in romanised Vietnamese (“Tiếng An Nam”), and while it was not the oldest version, it was certainly the first to be published, and possibly the first Vietnamese poem to appear in European typeset.\textsuperscript{64} Tế attributed the French and Latin translations to Mgr. Taberd, but I believe Philippe Minh’s abilities as a native speaker would have been indispensable.

The appearance of the poem in a published dictionary at this juncture is significant not simply due to the novelty of the endeavour, but because it represented a new stage in the development of romanised Vietnamese. Indeed it calls for reflection on two issues: the development of \textit{quốc ngữ} as a language medium for mission communication; and the position and cultural import of Catholic devotional poetry in the vernacular literary context. In short, analysis of the conception and spread of \textit{quốc ngữ} in terms of its use as a vehicle for mission evangelism or as a product of colonial systems is long overdue for reconsideration.

As Nguyễn Văn Trung has suggested, it is a mistake to consider figures such as Paulus Huỳnh Tĩnh Cùa, author of the first comprehensive Vietnamese dictionary in the colonial era, or the prolific pedagogue Petrus Trương Vĩnh Ký, as “pioneers” of the script.\textsuperscript{65} Recent studies by Trung and Tế have unearthed a flourishing discourse in the script from the eighteenth and early nineteenth-centuries, in a variety of formats, poetic, historiographic and personal correspondence.\textsuperscript{66} The 1840s appears to have marked a watershed in the expansion of the script’s usage. In the late 1830s and 1840s, the funding inflow from Europe boosted efforts to promote \textit{quốc ngữ} as a medium for instruction, propaganda and communication. Yet the main impetus for this must be attributed to Taberd’s dictionary. The publication of this dictionary, over sixty years

\textsuperscript{63} Điện-Ninh prefecture (phủ) was changed to Điện-Kánh in 1742. See \textit{Đại Nam Nhât Thông Chí} [the Complete Geography of Đại Nam] (Saigon, 1964), t.10-11, cf. Võ Long Tế, “Iné Tự-Dạo Ván ou Le Martyre d’Agnès”, p.318.

\textsuperscript{64} Võ Long Tế, “Iné Tự-Dạo Ván ou Le Martyre d’Agnès”, pp.311-12.

\textsuperscript{65} Nguyễn Văn Trung, \textit{Chữ Văn Quốc Ngữ}, pp.5-6, 121; Huỳnh-Tĩnh Paulus Cùa, \textit{Đại Nam Quốc Âm Từ Vị} [Dictionnaire Annamite] (Saigon: Rey, Curiol & Cie, 1895).

after its compilation by Pigneaux, demonstrates the new emphasis placed on language in mission processes, as characterised by Cuenot’s modernisation of reporting and administration.

From the small sample available in the MEP archival volumes for the 1840s, most material in quốc ngữ was produced by hand and copied for dissemination. Missionaries, local priests and clerks used the script widely to copy catechisms, to compose pastoral reports and to convey stories of martyrs.\(^67\) By the late 1840s and 1850s, however, the programme expanded significantly. Cuenot’s annual administrative reports for 1847 and 1848 indicate that a high priority was placed on publishing and that the means were available for the wide dissemination of material. In 1847, the apostolic vicar reported expenses of 1,425frs (roughly 838 ligatures of cash, or 17 taels of silver, or 500 phuong of rice) for “the printing-house” (imprimerie), although, the figure also included the purchase of “paper and some books from Macao”. The account also recorded that some 600frs had been used for “correspondence and missionary journeys” within the kingdom, expenses that would have enabled transmission of the printed material by either priests or couriers employed by the mission.\(^68\) Cuenot recorded similar figures of expenditure in his 1848 report, noting the use of 1,000 francs “for the maintenance of the printing-house, the purchase of paper, [and] distribution of books”.\(^69\) In terms of budget outlays for a mission serving a population of some 50,000 Catholics spread across nine provinces, these sums were significant.\(^70\) The combined amounts represent a practical investment in materials in a short period and, I believe, may suggest the purchase around this time of a small European printing-press which could have been easily smuggled into the mission by Chinese merchants with whom

\(^{67}\) Some examples include a quốc ngữ translation of Delamotte’s defence declaration at court during his trial, Delamotte, AMEP 749, 20/12/1842, pp.621-23; A letter by Petrus Diệu, AMEP 749, [1842], pp.541-42; and, by Cuenot, what appears to be a gazette for the congregations in his vicariate, which includes a brief history of the Vô Vuong persecution in the eighteenth century, Cuenot, AMEP 749, 22/02/1844, pp.997-1000.

\(^{68}\) Cuenot, “Cochinchine Orientale, 1847”, AMEP 750, no.34.

\(^{69}\) Cuenot, “Cochinchine Orientale, 1848”, AMEP 750, no.40.

\(^{70}\) These amounts represented just over four percent of the annual allocations sent from France in 1847 and 1848 for both Cochinchina vicariates. The 1847 allocation for Cochinchina was 32,510 fr, and for 1848, 25,950fr. cf. Nola Cooke, “Missionaries through the pages of the Annales”, p.10.
Catholicism’s Alternative Paths: Local Leaders, the Priesthood and the Mandarinate

missionaries had close contacts.\textsuperscript{71} With or without a European printing-press, Cuenot would have had local printing skills and methods at his disposal.

Cuenot was not alone in his efforts. Although the annual reports for Lefèbvre’s vicariate of West Cochinchina do not refer to printing in this period, it is probable that Cuenot’s activities provided material for mission in the Six Provinces as well. In the MEP vicariate of West Tonkin, Mgr. Retord had much greater resources at his disposal and the scope of his operations indicate what the mission was capable of during the period. Writing in 1850, Retord, who also had an “imprimerie”,\textsuperscript{72} described the regular dissemination of “pastoral letters” throughout the vicariate, which he used to announce the publication of matters as disparate as recently issued indulgences and news from different parts of the vicariate and probably other parts of the kingdom. Significantly, his medium of choice was \textit{quốc ngữ}.\textsuperscript{73}

The proliferation of Catholic literature before 1860 suggests the term \textit{quốc ngữ}, which may be translated as “national language”, itself needs to be historicised. For much of the first three centuries after the French Jesuit Alexander de Rhodes transcribed the vernacular in Latin letters, romanised Vietnamese was more familiarly known to missionaries, and perhaps Vietnamese students, as “Annamite”, “tiếng An Nam”, or, in a reference to the hybrid symbolisation of the language, as “annamitico-latin”.\textsuperscript{74} Yet one of the first usages of “\textit{quốc ngữ}”, appearing in the title of Mgr. Pigneaux’ 1774 Catholic catechism, \textit{Thánh giáo lí quốc ngữ}, or “Holy doctrine in quốc ngữ”, suggests that, at least for Catholic native readers, the term had widely accepted usage.\textsuperscript{75} As a term, \textit{quốc ngữ} has too easily been used as a general referent for romanised texts across colonial and pre-colonial eras without thought to its conception as a “national” language script,

\textsuperscript{71} Such a claim is difficult to substantiate in the absence of printed material, or confirmation in the archives, but it is not unimaginable that Cuenot had successfully arranged for the import of a small press clandestinely.

\textsuperscript{72} Retord, letter extract dated 2 April 1858, APF XXXI 1859, p.35.

\textsuperscript{73} Retord, letter extract dated 2 May 1850, APF, XXIII 1851, p.272.

\textsuperscript{74} See Alexander de Rhodes, \textit{Dictionarium Annamiticum [sic] Latinum, et Latinum ope Sacrae Congregationis de propaganda fide / in lucem editum ab Alexandro de Rhodes, (Roma : Typis Sacrae Congregationis, 1651).}

\textsuperscript{75} Alexander de Rhodes produced the first \textit{latin-annamite} catechism in the mid-seventeenth century, but the version used by MEP missionaries in the nineteenth-century was that composed by Pigneaux in 1774. To the best of my knowledge no revised versions were produced in the early nineteenth-century, Pigneaux de Behaine, \textit{AMEP, vol. 1095}. For further information on the early production of this work see, Frédéric Manteigne, \textit{Monseigneur Pigneau de Behaine: Evêque d’Adran Dignitaire de Cochinchine}, Archives des Missions Étrangères, études et documents series, no. 8, 1999, pp.65-72.
that is for a specific language community in a geographically defined territory. The reason for highlighting this here is to suggest that the concept of a “national language” was first propounded in Catholic devotional literature well before the colonial era. By 1840, *quốc ngữ* – or *latin-annamite* – as a medium and as a concept for local communication across the different dialectic and cultural regions of Vietnam, had been evolving for nearly two centuries, and should not be considered as a new development in mission or Vietnamese literary history.\(^{76}\)

In attempting to understand 1840s Catholic literature in this period, we need to be careful to avoid the trap of viewing “propaganda” solely as a platform for mission dogma. Instead, we might consider this genre in the context of wider indigenous literary cultures flourishing at the time. While contemporary scholarship has accorded plenty of attention to “patriotic scholars” of the nineteenth century, or the romantic classics produced by such figures as Nguyễn Du, comparatively little attention has been directed to contextualising different and often dissonant discursive practices.\(^{77}\) The Nguyễn-sanctioned Confucian (*nho*) discourse certainly dominated literary production at the time, but a number of less noticeable dissident traditions also flourished. These included those produced by remnant Lê, Mạc and Tây Sơn supporters concentrated in the north; an unofficial but openly tolerated forum contributed to by officials and classically educated scholars; an official Buddhist culture centred at Huế; and a number of unsanctioned yet widely spread folk-Buddhist and Daoist communities. The material produced was as diverse as the number of literary communities involved.\(^{78}\) In the mid-nineteenth century setting Catholic devotional literature represented one among a profusion of competing voices.

As Nguyễn Văn Trung has demonstrated, a variety of works published in the early colonial era ranging from religious poems, histories, and plays to folk-operas had their roots in the pre-colonial period. The production of these texts, he has shown, may

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\(^{76}\) Further research may uncover a wider and earlier propagation of the script, but for the purposes of this discussion I concentrate on the post-1830s period.


\(^{78}\) Moreover, we cannot take for granted that the bulk of these literatures were produced in the official language of the period, administrative Chinese. The Vietnamese demotic script, *chữ nôm*, was more widespread as a medium despite its neglect by the Nguyễn court. And, in the far south Cham and Khmer texts may also have been produced on a large scale.
be traced by the unique idiomatic expressions used from different periods and regions.\textsuperscript{79} Indeed, the \textit{Martyrdom of Agnes} was one among a larger number of panegyric poems. An anthology published by the mission printing house in the late nineteenth century provides a sample of the literature, poetry, histories, and ballads on offer, many of which were composed in the pre-1860 period.\textsuperscript{80} One poem, “Bô Gioang Tù Dạo”, or “The Martyrdom of Grandfather Jean”, for example, tells the story of an elderly Catholic arrested during the 1750 persecution in Đàng Trong (Cochinchina), under Võ Vương (r.1738-1765).\textsuperscript{81} The next composition tells the story of “Cô Phan Văn”, or “Verse on Master Phan”, detailing the travails of the MEP missionary François Jaccard [Phan], at the court of Minh Mạng and his execution in 1839.\textsuperscript{82} The anthology also contains a lengthy verse discussion of the religious milieu of the south titled “Hảm Oan Chi Tử”, which may be translated as “Discourse on Injustices Suffered”. The poem begins with a history of anti-Catholic hostilities under the Tây Sơn before moving on, in the final section, to discuss Confucianism (“Dao Nhữ”), Buddhism (“Dao Phật”), and the worship of the Buddhist goddess Quan âm.\textsuperscript{83}

Although further research is necessary to gain a more comprehensive picture of how widespread the Catholic discourse in chữ nôm and quốc ngữ was in pre-colonial society, the structure and language of these poems hold some clues as to their production. As with the \textit{Martyrdom of Agnes}, these texts were composed in six-eight meter (lục-bát),\textsuperscript{84} the most commonly employed poetic convention in Vietnamese verse, and would have required the intimate linguistic knowledge of a native speaker. According to Tê, Philippe Minh was a gifted chữ nôm scholar in his own right and wrote extensively in the form during his years in Penang.\textsuperscript{85} In fact, it is almost certain that much of this material was first composed in demotic script, and then possibly


\textsuperscript{80} Võ Văn Tuồng [Devotional Poetry and Tragedies], (Saigon: Imprimerie de la Mission, 1899), 3\textsuperscript{rd} edition. The first edition of this anthology may have been published in the 1870s.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., pp.424-36.

\textsuperscript{82} “Cô Bể Trén Phan Tù Đạo”, Ibid., pp.437-71.

\textsuperscript{83} “Hảm Oan Chi Tử”, Ibid., pp.556-76.

\textsuperscript{84} Some sections employ other conventions for literary effect.

\textsuperscript{85} Võ Long Tễ and Phạm Đình Khảm, “Phí Nắng Thi Tập” [Penang Collected Works], Saigon, Unpublished Manuscript, 1989. Cf. Nguyễn Văn Trung, “Một Vài Biểu Hiện Văn Hóa Của Ki Tố Giáo”, p.10, note.2. Unfortunately, Võ Long Tễ’s work does not appear to have been published. According to Trung, the manuscript contains unique research into the poetry composed by Phan Văn Minh – in chữ nôm – while he was based in Penang.
transmitted orally among congregations before being transcribed in romanised form.\textsuperscript{86} Young seminarians in Penang, such as Minh, and the battery of candidates studying in the three mission colleges in Cochin, I suggest, would have very likely played a major role in recording, publishing and disseminating such stories in the 1840s.

The strongest evidence to support this claim can be found in a mission report in the mid-1860s. Laudng the arrival of a printing press in his chrétienté of Thù Dâu Mot north of Saigon in 1866, Sorel explained that he aimed to use the machine not simply to print mission books but to “counterbalance, as much as possible, the publication of some more or less unsound (malsaines) Annamite brochures” which had been circulating at that time in the then recently established French language schools. According to the missionary:

It is ... our defrocked thây [teachers: catechists] who disseminate old booklets (bouquins) in Annamite characters. These booklets are translated into Latin and distributed in all the schools in the form of morals in action (morale en action).\textsuperscript{87}

It is unclear what these booklets contained by way of a “moral message” or story, but they certainly appear to have caused considerable irritation. Sources informed Sorel that the booklets had turned up in local schools. In response the Governor had ordered the production of “20 to 30 stories (histoires) where the details are true to life (naturelles)”.\textsuperscript{88} The full picture of this tantalising propaganda war is unfortunately not detailed further in Sorel’s letter, but the implications seem more or less clear. Neither the mission nor the colonial government had full control over vernacular printing in the region. That disavowed Catholic lay leaders could challenge the new regime using methods first developed by the mission, suggests that local Catholic discourse was well-established by the 1860s.

The relationship between chữ nôm and quôc ngữ in Catholic literary production during the 1840s highlights local forces in the development of the romanised script. Although a European invention, quôc ngữ was quickly adapted by Catholic scholars for local practices. The use of either of these vernacular scripts to tell the stories of

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\textsuperscript{86} I would like to acknowledge the efforts of Vô Long Tê and Nguyễn Văn Trung, both of whom have researched extensively on Catholic literature in the nineteenth-century but whose works I was unable to access for this discussion.

\textsuperscript{87} Sorel, AMEP 755, 29/07/1866, no.575.

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid.
Vietnamese martyrs and the transmission of these accounts throughout the kingdom, from the eighteenth century through to the colonial era, draws attention to powerful currents in late pre-colonial Vietnamese Catholic culture. The 1840s appears to have been a period when these currents took on a greater momentum. For polyglot Catholics with experience abroad in Penang, conditions at the time must have been perfect for the flourishing of literary production.

V. Literature and Politics
Cuenot and Retord’s efforts to consolidate and promote mission print activities in quốc ngữ and chữ nôm represented one feature of a broader literary and cultural drift within Vietnam. This shift combined two parallel and interconnected processes. The increased despatch of the Cochinchina mission’s students to Penang for seminary training saw the growth of an intellectually distinct generation of young Vietnamese men. The common experience of education in a foreign, European-controlled, cultural environment not only influenced new perspectives, it precipitated a new social consciousness. Concurrently, the growth of the local clergy coincided with the spread of ambiguous ties between Catholic and other local intellectual communities. This development, a convergence of two very different systems, had real consequences for the composition of local literate society. In the short term, it coincided with the first executions of officials identified as Catholics within the bureaucracy. Over the longer term, however, it led to the limited participation of Catholics within official circles.

One figure who exemplified the privileges and shifts taking place in the period was Nguyễn Trưởng Tô. Born into a Catholic family in Nghệ An province in the late 1820s, the son of a scholar, Tô studied classical Chinese and probably chữ nôm. As a well-born Catholic, he also received a mission education in quốc ngữ and Latin which, under the tutelage of the MEP missionary Gauthier in the late 1840s, led to his studying at Penang. In the early 1860s, Tô cut his ties with the mission and entered the employ of the Tự Đức court. Here he wrote extensively on the need for the Nguyễn bureaucracy to modernise and reform to face the French imperial threat. In short, Tô’s background and achievements highlights how the penetration of mission institutions at the local level effected subtle, yet far-reaching changes throughout the rest of society.

In his study of Nguyễn Trưởng Tổ, Mark McLeod illustrates the manner in which an exposure to mission education and European intellectual life informed his attitudes and proposals for reform in 1860s dynastic Vietnam. McLeod suggests that central to his strengths as an intellectual activist was his syncretic approach to adapting Catholic and Western concepts to the bureaucratic and moral problems manifesting in 1860s Vietnam. But this approach, a very radical one in the 1860s court debates, may not have been initiated by Tổ or due to his employment at court. Far from being a unique example of student educated in Chinese classics — and probably chữ nôm — and in French and Latin, Tổ represented one highly successful figure among a growing body of Catholic students.

Another prominent scholar who preceded Tổ as an intellectual activist, Đặng Đức Tuân, contributed widely in his later years both to local Catholic literature and to debates on reform within Vietnam. He also served at the Tự Đức court in the 1860s. Born into quite different social circumstances in Bình Định, Tuân’s story embodies that of his generation, in particular in his having sought an alternative to the bureaucracy.

According to a biography and compilation of his literary works collated by Lam Giang and Võ Ngọc Nhã, Đặng Đức Tuân was born in 1806 into a prestigious family whose members had supported Gia Long’s cause at the turn of the century. His great-grandfather, Đặng Đức Siêu, served as the Rites minister (Thượng Thư Lê bộ) in the 1810s. His grandfather, Đặng Đức Thiêm, held a variety of senior appointments from the 1830s but, for reasons not noted, was dismissed from high office in 1850. Unfortunately little is known about Đặng Đức Tuân’s father, Đặng Đức Lành, beyond

91 The discussion explores Tổ’s radical reform proposals, including an independent judiciary for the kingdom and the replacement of Confucian studies with Western disciplines, which McLeod sharply contrasts with Nguyễn views of the primacy of Confucian ideology, as an institution of moral and spiritual force, in bureaucratic and social order. Ibid., pp.329-30.
92 Ibid., p.315.
94 Ibid., pp.11-12. See also, DNTL IV, p.161, and LT II, pp.185-90. Lam Giang and Võ Ngọc Nhã also cite several works by the senior official, including Vạn Thế Thường Sự Bạ Da Lộc, a verse panegyric of the French missionary Pigneaux. Đặng Đức Tuân, p.12.
95 The biography spells this name as “Chiêm”, Lam Giang and Võ Ngọc Nhã, Đặng Đức Tuân, p.10.
96 DNTL XXVII, p.216. He was appointed provincial financial administrator (Bô Chinh) of the metropolitan province of Quảng-Ngãi during the late Minh Mạng reign, DNTL, XIX, p.180. Under Thiệu Trị, he served as Governor-general of Hải Dương-Quảng Yen provinces from 1843, (DNTL, XXIV, p.422), and Nghệ An-Hà Tĩnh from 1846, DNTL XXVI, p.162.
the fact that he was a retired scholar (án sĩ) and teacher in the family’s home district of Bồng Sơn. Dặng Đức Tuấn was himself a capable student and in the regional exams held at Bình Định in 1825 just failed to achieve the lesser regional degree (tú tài) owing to a minor error in his composition. Following this disappointment, Tuấn taught locally along with his older brother, Hậu.

At some point early in the Thiệu Trị reign, Cuenot made enquiries in the districts surrounding Gò Thị for a classical scholar willing to teach administrative Chinese within the mission; early evidence of attempts to provide seminarians with a classical instruction. A lay leader approached the still celibate Dặng Đức Tuấn with the proposal. He agreed and shortly after travelled to Gia Định where, with the assistance of the mission, he departed for Penang. Over the following years, Tuấn taught seminarians and probably also missionaries. Significantly, during his stay he accepted the offer to study for the priesthood, and when he returned to Bình Định early in the 1850s he received ordination and assumed clerical duties.

Throughout the unstable years of the 1850s, Tuấn worked closely with Cuenot. Although little is known of his life in this period, the vast array of his works compiled by Lam Giang and Võ Ngọc Nhã demonstrates that he was a prolific proponent of local Catholic literature. His abilities as a scholar, both in Chinese and vernacular Vietnamese, and linguist ultimately rescued him from suffering the same fate as many other priests in this period. In 1862, he was captured by the district magistrate of Mỏ Đức in the north of Bình Định and narrowly escaped execution by being called to the court as an interpreter. Following the defeat of Royal forces around Saigon, and the military stalemate of 1862, Tuấn accompanied Lâm Duy Thiệp and Phanh Thanh Giản as a translator and advisor in the negotiations with the French Admiralty over the carving up of the southern Six Provinces.

Dặng Đức Tuấn’s biography draws attention to a number of overlapping features of contemporary career choices and Catholic identity. While the Nguyễn bureaucracy offered the only official and furthermore most popularly accepted means for personal advance, it was not the only one available to young men in the 1840s and 1850s. Many focused their energies on long years of study only to remain private scholars, perhaps in

97 Lam Giang and Võ Ngọc Nhã, Dặng Đức Tuấn, p.12.
98 Ibid.
private protest against the Nguyễn or, as in the case of the northern scholar-rebel Cao Bá Quát, to launch open attacks against the dynasty. Broadly defined, the goal of personal advancement in mid-nineteenth-century Vietnam was not necessarily circumscribed by notions of bureaucratic prestige and status.

To suggest that the dominant path, the Nguyễn bureaucracy, was the only desirable one among a number of possible ways of achieving self-fulfilment and success in the world is to denigrate the diversity in human endeavour. As Tuán’s personal choices indicate, the suggestion that commitment to one of these channels locked young men into an unchanging and life-long path and political identity that precluded other intellectual possibilities is overly reductionist. It obscures the complexity and fluidity of identities possible at the time. Instead of simply viewing generations of young men solely in terms of the Nguyễn examination system and bureaucratic service or officially sanctioned scholarly practices, it is important to consider the effect of personal experiences, foreign contacts, and varying perceptions of advance and self-fulfilment on real individuals. The expansion of Catholic mission education played a remarkable role in each of these aspects of the socio-cultural environment of the 1840s and 1850s.

More generally, Đặng Đức Tuán’s story was, I suggest, indicative of a broadening in relationships between missionaries and priests, and local officials and scholars during this period. Shared literary and educational pursuits appear to have made contact between mission and non-Catholic scholars possible.

As we saw with Philippe Minh, belonging to a Catholic community certainly did not preclude access to traditional forms of education, in Chinese or chữ nôm. In fact, by the end of the 1840s both Cuenot and Retord employed classical scholars to instruct mission students. The main problem, as described by Cuenot, was that these “masters” used “superstitious books”; Confucian manuals and literature which conflicted with mission doctrine. To overcome this problem, Cuenot advocated training a new generation of students in administrative Chinese who could in the future train others without such literature. The project required the employment of a “master of letters”, estimated at a cost of 150fr per annum, or around 230 ligatures of copper cash. In 100 Thus, with 1000fr, Cuenot calculated he could maintain a Master and fourteen students on a

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100 According to an 1847 rate of exchange, 1 silver tael was equivalent to 110 fr, or 175 ligatures of copper cash, APF, XXI 1849, p.168.

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stipend of 60fr each. Students were to receive three years training and afterwards would be expected to teach in other schools through the vicariate.101

Also in 1847, Retord implemented a similar programme in Tonkin, although on a much larger scale.102 Reporting on the progress of his project in 1854, he wrote that along with some 50 Latinists, he also had 40 students of Chinese.103 For the Tonkin vicariates, education in characters also involved participating in literary discussions with non-Catholics. Thus, a year later Mgr. Diaz, based in the Dominican vicariate of Tonkin Central which covered the Red River delta provinces of Nam Định and Hưng Yến, wrote that he had recently facilitated a competition among “pagan” and Catholic scholars on “different matters of the Religion [Catholicism]”. According to Diaz, such was the attraction of participating in a literary contest that some five students of the local educational mandarin had participated, with the winners receiving “books on the Religion” composed in Chinese.104 Cuenot and Lefèvre unfortunately did not record similar events in the southern vicariates, but the contest demonstrates the flexibility and willingness with which missionaries, Catholic and non-Catholic scholars could interact.

While a comprehensive investigation of the overlap of Catholic literature and official Nguyễn discourse will not be attempted here, several modest observations can be ventured. Setting Royal edicts and memorials aside, one lengthy text by the prominent southern scholar Nguyễn Đình Chiểu (1822-1888) provides an arresting impression of contesting ideological discourses, Catholic, Buddhist and Confucian, in the 1850s.

Chiểu was only seven years younger than Philip Minh, but he experienced the changes of the 1820s and 1830s from a very different context. A native of Tân Bình prefecture, neighbouring Saigon, his father had served as a clerk for Lê Văn Duyệt.105 However, Chiểu was not destined for a career in the bureaucracy himself. Forced to abandon his aspirations after being struck by blindness in his late twenties, Chiểu returned to his family home. It was here, some time in the early 1850s, that, according to Phan Văn Huspend, he composed Dương Tự - Hà Mậu.106 Written in chữ nôm, this

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101 Cuenot, AMEP 750, 14/02/1848, no. 33.
103 Retord, letter extract dated October 1854, APF, XXVIII 1856, p.108.
104 Diaz, letter extract dated 2 May 1855, APF XXIX 1857, p.64.
105 Ibid., p.X.
106 Ibid., p.XII-XIII.
lengthy poem tells the story of two men, Dương, a Buddhist, and Mậu, a Catholic, focusing on the misleading beliefs promoted by each of their religions. In the story the two visit heaven and hell with the assistance of a magician in search of the truth behind their beliefs. Instead of finding Christ or Buddha, the two only discover monks and priests suffering in hell as punishment for misleading their followers.\(^\text{107}\)

Chiều was undoubtedly aware of both Buddhist and Catholic print cultures in his region. In fact, in some of his first comments on Catholicism (đạo Hòa-lan) in Dương Tổ - Hà Mậu, he refers to a sentence - "Tề sanh hoạ mạng", or "How to live life" - which he claimed appeared in a book used to "enter the religion" (đầu đạo). This is clearly a reference to the Catholic catechism, which was produced in Chinese, quốc ngữ and in chữ nôm. It is not possible to provide an accurate estimate of how well disseminated hand-written copies of the demotic script or quốc ngữ versions of the catechism were in society, but I believe this would have been among the most prolifically duplicated texts in the early 1800s. It would have enjoyed even wider production from the late 1840s owing to Cuenot and Retord’s efforts. In fact, this text may have been one of the most widely dispersed doctrinal tracts for all of Vietnamese readers in either demotic script or quốc ngữ. It is through such texts that the majority of Confucian literati and Nguyễn officials would have learnt about the fundamental aspects of Catholic doctrine.

But even if Nguyễn Đình Chiều’s Dương Tổ - Hà Mậu was not part of a wider debate among scholars on superstitious practices and, by extension, Confucian orthodoxy, it hardly emerged from an intellectual vacuum. Other clues to a discourse on Catholicism may be found in mission correspondence. Of note, Sơn Tây’s Governor-General Nguyễn Đăng Giai, was to the regret of his colleagues in the Official History Office (Quốc Sử Quan) guilty of questionable ideological leanings. Born into a distinguished political family from Quảng Bình, Đăng Giai had an illustrious career spanning three reigns – he died in late 1854 – demonstrating capable civil and military expertise in a variety of posts.\(^\text{108}\) Although a loyal official, mission correspondence from Mgr. Retord reveals that Đăng Giai was a devout Buddhist with pragmatic views of Catholicism.\(^\text{109}\) In a letter from 1852 Retord reported on a flourishing indirect

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correspondence between himself and the official in which they debated Catholicism. Dặng Giai also canvassed the idea at court, according to Retord, of sectioning-off chrétientés, forcing all Catholics to move to designated areas where they could practice their religion in peace, but banning all conversion and all foreign missionaries in the rest of the kingdom. Such was their relationship that in 1853 Dằng Giai, in a move reminiscent of relationships in previous generations with Catholic missionaries, accepted medicine supposedly prepared by Retord, and even allowed a Vietnamese priest to baptise one of his dying sons.

Far from suggesting Dằng Giai was on the verge of converting, the relationship, one of administrative and personal discretion, reflected Dằng Giai’s flexibility on spiritual matters, a position in which he was not alone. It is against such behaviour that Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, a man of comparatively limited life-experience and no administrative experience, would have levelled Dương Tịch - Hà Mậu. Of significance in the poem is Chiểu’s close association of Catholicism and Buddhism, both of which he described as superstitious (di đoan), and their sharp contrast with Confucian orthodoxy (đạo nho). Apart from polemicising Catholicism and Buddhism, the piece may have been part of a general debate among scholars and students on folk-spiritualism and public morality, since the poem not only reflects hostility towards Catholicism and Buddhism but advocates a singular, narrow view towards the moral authority of Confucianism. This may imply some discord among literati throughout the kingdom on the style of Confucian orthodoxy promoted by the dynasty, and not just in regard to official historiography as Langlet has shown.

VI. Catholicism and the Bureaucracy
While speculation on intellectual discord within the bureaucracy requires broader analysis of scholarly works across the region, it seems significant to me that the appearance of Dương Tịch - Hà Mậu coincided with the first public identifications of Catholics serving within the bureaucracy. The first occurred in 1847 when Trần Ngọc Dao, a Sơn Tây prefect, was denounced by Nguyễn Dằng Giai for “secretly following the religion”. Largely ignored under Minh Mạng and in the early Thiệu Trị years, the

110 Retord, letter extract dated 5 May 1852, APF, XXV 1853, p.90-95.
111 Retord, letter extract dated 22 April 1853, APF, XXVII 1855, pp.25-29.
113 DNTL XXVI, p.277.
presence of Christian officials in the bureaucracy emerged as a burning issue after 1847. Although it is difficult to estimate how widespread Catholics were, largely because missionaries did not keep figures regarding the social background of converts, the issue deserves attention for its political implications. The punishment of Catholics at this juncture suggests a number of possibilities including that their presence was more widespread than has hitherto been recognised, and, perhaps, that officials converted in increasing numbers in this particular period. Without speculating on the wider shifts in Nguyễn bureaucratic culture, the acknowledgement of the presence of Catholic mandarins might also indicate factional struggles at court between anti-Catholic officials and sympathetic voices opposed to the harsh proscription.

We do know that the Catholic presence was not negligible and that some officials did convert. The Spanish Dominican Fr. Hermosilla from Bác Ninh province, for instance, reported in 1857 on his recent successes in baptising “a number of officials”, one of whom may have been a prefect. Such reports are rare and unfortunately do not offer any indication of the number of low level Christian officials, clerks in district offices or canton chiefs, that might have existed. Yet in considering the spread of Catholicism within official ranks, other factors demand attention.

Unlike other sections of society, officials faced the greatest challenge in maintaining a balance between observing their beliefs and upholding their duties. For one, a believer’s personal observance of the religion did not necessarily accord with orthodox Catholic views. The Church made sharp distinction between practicing Catholics, those who fully conformed to doctrinal discipline and avoided what it considered to be superstitious practices, and followers who it loosely termed “baptised pagans”, those who had received baptism but did not fully conform to regulations. Such strict views certainly conflicted with the requirements of holding office within the bureaucracy. As seen in the Nguyễn Repertoire of Institutions and Regulations (Khâm Đình Đại Nam Hội Điện Sự Lễ), the court required officials recognised within the hierarchy – district magistrates (huyện) and above – to perform and observe a number of rituals, some daily, monthly or annual, as part of their duties. For example, with Minh Mạng’s issue of the Ten Articles edict in 1834, regulations required local and district

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officials to prostrate before a copy of the edict in front of gathered villagers. The failure or refusal to comply to such court-sanctioned obligations amounted to a subversive rejection of the institution, not to mention an affront to royal authority. In short, it would have been impossible for a devout Catholic official to maintain his faith while fulfilling all the ritual requirements of his position.

However, personal compromise of one’s religious beliefs against official duties must have been relatively widespread, as suggested by the case of Hồ Đình Hy, whose biography was recorded by Joseph Sohier. The son of Catholic parents from Như Lâm village in the capital province of Thừa Thiên, Hy entered the Board of Works (Công bộ) in the seventh year of the Minh Mạng reign, 1827. He served a total of thirty one years, attaining status at the third grade of the bureaucratic hierarchy, which Sohier rather inflated to describe as just below that of a Governor-general (tổng đốc). Although a senior official with a distinguished career, Hy only appeared twice in the dynastic chronicles. The first, in 1846 under Thiệu Trị, records his position as the overseer for the royal citadel’s administration of Works (Độc công Nội vụ phủ). His memorial to the court at the beginning of the year reported a shortage in court embroiderers and called for more to be trained in order to complete royal projects. In an 1856 memorial, he was noted as a chief director of one of the six courts (Thai bộc tự khanh), a post situated in the lower echelon of the third grade. Any subsequent positions Hồ Đình Hy may have held have been omitted from the chronicles, undoubtedly due, as we shall see, to his shameful demise. Nonetheless, he was a member of the Nguyễn political elite, at least as defined by Cooke, and his promotion to this level would have required Tự Đức’s personal approval.

How Hồ Đình Hy survived so long and rose so high within the court hierarchy raises some difficult although fascinating questions as to the personal compromise he would have endured, not to mention the degree of complicity necessary from his colleagues and immediate masters. All the same, Hy’s charade did not last. The

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115 See chapter 2, also, HDSL VII, p.132.
116 In fact at 3-B it placed lower than a provincial financial officer, 3-A.
117 DNTL XXVI, p.21.
118 DNTL XXVIII, p.284.
disastrous Montigny mission of September 1856, which ended in the unprovoked bombardment of Đà Nẵng harbour, concentrated Huế’s desire to purge Catholics from within the bureaucracy and shortly after, in November, following a denunciation, Hồ Đình Hy and a number of Catholics living within the royal citadel were arrested. Tried and found guilty by the royal censorate (viên Đô sát) of “secretly following the religion of Gia-Tô”, he was decapitated the following May, 1857. According to Sohier, a further four mandarins of indeterminate position were arrested during the period. However, the exact number of Catholic officials punished is difficult to calculate as Herrengt reported that a total of twenty-two other Catholics – whose status or official ranks is unknown – were tattooed on their cheeks and exiled to the north. While it is not worth speculating on the status of the four other officials or the twenty-two Catholics given the lack of details, it is significant that such a large number of citadel-dwellers were identified and punished.

Interestingly, it was noted at Hy’s trial that he had sent one of his sons to study in Penang for over seven years. This is itself an astounding detail considering Hy’s own privileged position, and raises the obvious question as to why he would have chosen this path for his son over the bureaucracy. Hy, undoubtedly realising how tentative his own position was, probably saw little future for his children and therefore guided his son to a safer path. Certainly Hy’s son was in safer hands in Penang.

The circumstances of Hy’s arrest and execution, shortly after the Montigny expedition, alert us to the harsh political realities of the period. From the late 1840s, heightened fears at court of a French attack had led to calls for greater efforts to police the bureaucracy for Catholics. Thus, in the late 1840s and early 1850s we see a proliferation of anti-Catholic edicts under Tự Đức. The most serious and wide-reaching measures, issued according to Borelle in a mid-1854 edict, ordered that all sections of society – not just common subjects – recant, offering a period of amnesty for each class. Thus, suspected Catholic officials were allowed one month to renounce the

121 Herrengt identified Hồ Đình Hy as “thái bộc”, reflecting a regional pronunciation of “thái bộc”, high vestiary to the king, AMEP 750, 20/06/1857, no.88; see also, Herrengt, AMEP 750, 15/04/1858, no.95.
123 Herrengt, AMEP 750, no.88
124 Ibid.
125 DNTL XXVII, pp.108-112.
Catholicism’s Alternative Paths: Local Leaders, the Priesthood and the Mandarinate

religion, soldiers received three months, whereas common subjects had six months.\textsuperscript{126} Officials at all levels, from district magistrates to provincial executives, faced severe punishments, fines, demotions and corporal punishment, for failing to arrest those within their jurisdictions or communities which harboured Catholics and missionaries.\textsuperscript{127} The principle articles of this edict were repeated in later orders issued by Huế in 1859.\textsuperscript{128}

Indeed, Hy’s arrest was all to similar to that of the first Catholic official to be executed, Trần Ngọc Dao. In the aftermath of the Lapierre attack on Đà Nẵng in April 1847, shock was followed immediately by accusations and denunciations. First, within weeks of the bombardment, Trần Ngọc Dao was denounced by Nguyễn Đăng Giai.\textsuperscript{129} Then several months later, in October, accusations surfaced that a sergeant (suất đội), Vũ Văn Diễn, had been responsible for inviting the disaster and for having given away crucial intelligence to the French. The passage implied he too was a Catholic.\textsuperscript{130} Similarly, Hồ Đình Hy was framed as a traitor (mưu phản quốc) only one month after the Montigny attack in September 1856.\textsuperscript{131} These officials may very well have been turncoats, but it seems more likely that the court’s response in each of these instances represented more of a vengeful knee-jerk reaction designed to shock and intimidate officials throughout the kingdom.

Such scapegoating is certainly understandable given the intense anxiety aroused by the bombardments. Yet, that the court could so swiftly single out Catholic officials for punishment does suggest that Catholic officials were relatively identified. In fact, the memorial reporting Vũ Văn Diễn and Trần Ngọc Dao’s actions, a reminder that all officials needed to comply with the proscription of Catholicism, notes in passing that among the population people of the type (hạng) of these two officials were many.\textsuperscript{132} External political factors appear to have played the decisive role in initiating aggressive purges at key times. However, it is significant that Catholic officials even managed to flourish at the heart of the kingdom against the political backdrop of the proscription. At the very least, it demonstrates that Nguyễn anti-Catholicism was inconsistent over time.

\textsuperscript{126} Borelle, \textit{AMEP} 755, 1/02/1855 no.84.
\textsuperscript{127} \textit{DNTL} XXVIII, pp.60-61.
\textsuperscript{128} For 1859 see, \textit{DNTL} XXIX, p.91.
\textsuperscript{129} \textit{DNTL} XXVI, p.277.
\textsuperscript{130} \textit{DNTL} XXVI, p.385.
\textsuperscript{131} \textit{DNTL} XXVIII, p.284.
\textsuperscript{132} \textit{DNTL} XXVI, p.385.
and with regards to official action, never total in its implementation. As Alain Forest has suggested for society in pre-nineteenth century Tonkin, these factors suggest, I propose, that the Catholic presence in the bureaucracy reflected the proportional size of this community.

VII. Conclusion
The 1840s brought new impetus to the expansion of education in the mission and the promotion of Catholic literature. One of the key changes of the period was the precipitous growth of the local clergy and the greater responsibility and religious authority ascribed to lay leaders at the grass-roots level. What distinguishes this period from earlier decades is the large number of Vietnamese students who studied at the Collège Générale in Penang. Phan Văn Minh’s contribution to Taberd’s dictionary may be difficult to measure, but his place among a group of talented mission scholars and linguists should not go unnoticed. His lengthy sojourn in Penang and Pondicherry may have been exceptional; but he still represented one among a growing group of young men from the late 1830s who came to combine their expertise in Vietnamese and classical literature with their experiences of French-European education in the mission. From the 1840s, the rate at which this occurred and the number of students involved was unprecedented, and it had a profound effect on a whole generation of Catholics. In later decades, this generation would have an enormous impact not only in early French colonial society in Cochinchina, but also in Huế.

In the meantime, however, this group had a real influence on their non-Catholic scholar contemporaries. The spread of Catholic literature, a key feature of the 1840s, contributed to the expansion of mission activity and created a richer environment for intellectual endeavour. It also, I suggest, made the priesthood an attractive path of advance for young Catholic men. Crucially, literature appears to have fed into other aspects of Vietnamese intellectual life during the 1850s. While our view onto local literary culture is limited for this period, the prominence of Catholicism as a topic of discussion in official literature and the unusual interaction between mission members and senior officials highlights a fair degree of cross-cultural interaction. Such

interaction also indicates a relative level of tolerance for Catholics within the Nguyễn bureaucracy.
By the mid-1850s, Nguyên antipathy had been expressed for over a generation in numerous edicts, displayed through violent public executions and enforced through a repertoire of bureaucratic measures. Large sections of officialdom and court members viewed Catholicism as a grave threat to the stability of the dynasty. The memory of the Lê Văn Khoi rebellion in the early 1830s and the French naval raid at Đà Nẵng in 1847 had vindicated suspicions and in turn underpinned recriminations. Although the court projected hostility, perceptions varied at other levels of Nguyên society. Below the reach of central authority, in the provinces and at the lower levels of the bureaucracy, many pragmatic officials who preferred accommodation over conflict sought harmony in their districts and quietly tolerated Catholics. Although chrétienté could not practice openly, forced compliance with the court’s harshest edicts could be averted through careful arrangements with canton and district officials. However, suspicion remained rife throughout society. Many mainstream communities with no personal knowledge or experience of Catholics undoubtedly associated Catholicism with dangerous religious beliefs, illegal activity, and sedition. At the end of 1858, the onset of the Franco-Spanish invasion thrust these concerns to the fore of community relations.

Most scholarship has focused on the military and political dimensions of the French invasion, so that comparatively little is known of the transformation in community relations in the prelude to colonial rule. This chapter seeks to explore this new territory by investigating the impact of mission reforms within Catholic communities and the effect these changes had during the Franco-Spanish invasion. To
The End of Pre-Colonial Catholicism in Cochin-China

begin with, tensions within the mission, especially between newly arrived missionaries and local priests, reveal that the invasion placed serious pressures on relationships between foreign and local priests. Outside the mission organisation, the invasion shattered the grounds for accommodation and compromise that had previously allowed special arrangements to smooth many tensions between chrétientés and local officials. The invasion’s catastrophic impact, which caused widespread famine and led to mass violence against Catholics in some areas, contributed to a devastating rupture within society.

I. Catholicism and the French Invasion

Focusing on the military conflict of the invasion, modern scholarship has provided a comprehensive description of Franco-Spanish campaigns into the countryside and local resistance efforts to the invasion. However, very little is known of the traumatic social change that swept the region and ushered in colonial rule. Historiography has taken few steps to move beyond the military dimension and recent studies of the invasion have continued to concentrate on local armed resistance efforts, further overlooking the complexity of community level politics.¹

The simplification is most clearly seen in discussions of the question of Catholic military support for the French invaders. Until recently, studies have questioned but ultimately dismissed direct military involvement by Catholics. Milton Osborne’s early study refuted the possibility of military support for lack of evidence.² More recently, Mark McLeod has argued that “Tonkinese Catholics” not only joined the Franco-Spanish forces but were formed into detachments, trained and entered the conflict at Đà Nẵng and in the south.³ Although largely unsubstantiated, the claim is certainly plausible and may yet be corroborated by further research into French military records.


² See for example, Trần Văn Giàu who on the question noted simply that “experience in Đà Nẵng and Nam Kỳ demonstrated that not many Catholics followed the Westerners in attacking the homeland” (Trần Văn Giàu, Chống Xâm Lăng, pp.32-33.). Similarly, Marr and Osborne, in their groundbreaking studies of the early colonial era, concurred with Giàu that Catholic support “was not forthcoming”, (Milton E. Osborne, The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), p.29; and David G. Marr, Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p.27).

³ I consider this claim to be largely unsubstantiated. McLeod referred to secondary sources, notably the work of Vo Đức Hanh. Mark McLeod, The Vietnamese Response to French Intervention, p.45. The view is also subscribed to by Nguyễn Văn Kiểm, in “Chính Sach Doi Voi Thien Chua Giao”, 2000, 2, p.39.
The End of Pre-Colonial Catholicism in Cochinchina

All the same, the detour is indicative of a simplification of political responses. In effect, by raising the question of Catholic support for the invaders, studies make an *a priori* judgement of Catholic loyalties as suspect. Other studies have depicted Catholics as collaborators in a wide variety of treacherous activities, from passive resistance against the Nguyễn forces to simple support in the form of offering food and directions to invading detachments. Tarring all Catholics with the same traitor's brush, such views offer little room for analysis of identity, community motivations, or response to the turmoil of the period.

A major problem with these approaches is the application of modern notions of political identity to Nguyễn Vietnamese society, particularly in regard to the reductionism implicit in defining Catholics as a traitorous community. Most disturbingly, in the quest to ascribed blame for the invasion, most studies have completely overlooked the impact of the previous decades' of court antipathy and demonisation and the contemporary trauma caused by rounding up whole communities, internment in holding camps, not to mention the post-invasion mass executions. Of the main forces threatening Nguyễn rule in the late 1850s, local Catholics are generally contrasted with “Vietnamese” to suggest that religious affiliation defined not only social but also political difference. Inherent in this perception, too, is the conception of Christian-ness as a marker of ethnicity. To a large extent this excessive reductionism is due to the retrospective approaches taken to the study of the 1850s and 1860s and specifically to the question of ascribing Vietnamese political identities with hindsight intervening. For example, in her history of the MEP presence in Vietnam, Nicole-Dominique Lé draws the extraordinary conclusion that the same socio-cultural differences which led to internecine violence between Catholics and non-Catholics in the 1850s and during the invasion also underlay the political crises of the Buddhist demonstrations against the Ngô Đình Diệm regime in the 1960s Republic of Viet Nam a century later. Such analyses portray identity as static over time and across different regions, and suggest that religious affiliation and political loyalty were inextricably connected.

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4 See also Nguyen Thi Thanh, “The French Conquest of Cochinchina, 1858-1862” Cornell University PhD Dissertation, 1992, pp.183;
While not discounting that Catholics were involved in the upheavals of the period or that, in the context of the worsening persecution of the later 1850s, they did not see potential gain, or simple survival and protection, in aligning themselves with their missionary patrons or the invading forces, local loyalties and regional realities played a much greater role in events than has been recognised. Missionary sources in Bác Ký, for example, suggest that Catholic uprisings there had more to do with long term economic degradation and widespread famine, than purely religious oppression. In fact, for much of the 1850s regional tensions in the north, principally among remnant Lê supporters, had generated perpetual unrest. When the Franco-Spanish forces landed in 1858, they arrived in a kingdom that was already riven with internal strife. The invasion provided the political catalyst for numerous groups with grievances against the Nguyễn dynasty to capitalise on the instability and challenge the status quo.

II. Generational Change in the Mission

To better understand the position of Catholics in the south during the hostilities in the 1858 to 1862 period it is first necessary to begin with an explanation of the shifting relations within the mission. While the period saw great change in relationships with mainstream society, dramatic changes also occurred within the mission’s clerical hierarchy. These changes foreshadowed a wider generational shift that came to define the position of the Church in the 1860s. A brief look at the state of the West Cochinchina vicariate in the 1850s reveals the success of the previous decade’s reform of mission organisation and administration.

For much of the 1850s missionary records for West Cochinchina provide an impressive picture of expansion and growth. The violent years of persecution and sustained proscription had not stayed the spread of the religion. Instead, it appears to have contributed to its growth. In the far south, after the devastation of the cholera epidemic from 1849 to 1851, the Catholic population recovered and grew in the early 1850s by a net increase of as much as 1000 new converts annually. In January 1853, Lefèvre claimed that the population of the West Cochinchina Vicariate, covering the

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6 Recounting Mgr. Retord’s description of events, Herrengt reported that:

“[T]he people, whether Christian or pagan are dying of starvation; there is burning and pillaging [and] the mandarins vex [the population] with an unaccustomed fury. The prisons are overflowing with prisoners, some because of the religion [Catholicism] and others because of rebellion; among this last group the large number are pagans, but there are also some Christians (Herrengt, AMEP 750, 15/04/1858, no.95).
Six Provinces, numbered 27,000; five years later he reported the figure had risen to 32,000. While many of these neophytes would have been the teenage children of Catholic parents, or those who sought baptism on their deathbed, the rise is still significant in the context of enduring hostilities.

Mission efforts to sustain a figure of 1000 adult baptisms per year, a remarkable increase on figures from the 1830s, vindicated the early 1840s reforms initiated by Cuenot. The steady rise can very probably be explained, in large part at least, as a direct result of the stability offered by chrétiénté structures in face of the socio-economic uncertainties of the late Thiệu Trị and early Tự Đức reigns. There was a widespread search for stability in this period, so that a correlation might be drawn between the mission’s success and the emergence of folk-Buddhist movements in the region. Most notable of these was the Bửu Sơn Ký Huòng sect (Strange Fragrance of the Precious Mountain), which also established settlements in the Mekong delta west to Cambodia in 1849. Similar to the Catholic mission, this movement offered Vietnamese, still a relative minority in this Khmer-dominated region, comprehensive mechanisms for community support. The attractiveness of these two unorthodox cults is best seen according to the two defining, and somewhat adverse, features common to both: the openness of membership to all sections of society, and the requirement of strict adherence to religious guidelines in a rigidly structured community. Catholicism and folk-Buddhism accepted all, from criminals and soldiers to wealthy merchants and the educated. But in their inclusiveness, they both demanded a rejection of the worldly and of old ways. Exclusivity in doctrine, it should be added, provided a cultural structure that bound congregations tightly and in turn offered a sense of security in response to the tumultuous world.

While the mission reforms provided the framework for better coordination of mission activities, the growth in the Catholic population in the Six Provinces can be attributed largely to the efforts of the local clergy. In 1858, they comprised twenty
priests, four deacons and over thirty trained catechists. During the 1850s, only four missionaries administered the vicariate: Lefèvre, based in Thi Nghè on the outskirts of Gia Định town; Borelle in the isolated chrétienté of Cái Mon; Pernot hidden in Đa Quốc on the Mekong; and Guillou patiently seeking converts at the recently established mission among the Stiêng people on the Cambodian frontier. The high ratio of local clergy to missionaries reflected the adherence to the long term aims to place greater responsibility in the hands of local leaders, a course of reform adhered to since the Gò Thị Synod in 1841. Overall, the shift was successful and valuable, given the greater ease with which local clergy circulated through the region and the lesser risk they posed to the communities they visited.

Reform to the mission organisation in Cochinchina had not simply created more doctrinally disciplined, self-contained congregations, it had delivered greater authority and influence to local leaders and the indigenous priesthood. This shift in authority enabled a higher level of local autonomy from the French controlled mission hierarchy. However, it also created tensions and increased grounds for conflict. While the increased responsibility of local clergy appeared to work considerably well in West Cochinchina, the shift had a destabilising impact on the East Cochinchina vicariate.

Unfortunately absent from the mission archives for this period are the administrative records for the East Cochinchina Vicariate administered by Mgr. Cuenot. Their absence is significant as Cuenot had been instrumental to the changes outlined at Gò Thị in 1841. Far from suggesting the decline of the mission, it reflected an unusual shift in relationships in which local priests exercised greater authority over newly arrived missionaries. An important clue is provided by Charles Arnoux (1825-1864), a young missionary who arrived in the vicariate in 1851. Writing from outside the vicariate, in Singapore in April 1857, he reported to the MEP directors in Paris the sensational news of Cuenot’s erratic behaviour. Arnoux not only reported that Cuenot had become “severe in the breadth of excess in following his interests or ideas of the moment”, but increasingly threatened with excommunication anyone who acted or spoke against his ideas. The young missionary spared no details, making the defaming claim that the apostolic vicar preferred the advice of locals to that of his confreres, even

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9 Lefèvre, “Vicariat apostolique de la Cochinichine Occidentale, 1858”, AMEP 750, January 1859?[date not available], no.124.
10 Arnoux, AMEP 750, 15/04/1857, no.84.
though the locals were wont, as he asserted, to “lie, mislead [and] flatter him”. Cuenot not only treated younger missionaries with contempt but was accused of mistreating local priests and converts as well. According to another accusation, the apostolic vicar also used the threat of excommunication to blackmail “Christians from whom he took fields or money in an unjust and most cruel manner”.

It is unclear what motivated Arnoux to complain of Cuenot’s behaviour in such terms, but the overall situation indicates above all a dangerous breakdown of relations between young missionaries and the veteran apostolic vicar. The situation suggests several possibilities. In 1857, Cuenot had been in the vicariate for over two decades and had been instrumental to dramatic change in the Church organisation. He was not especially old at 55, making senility unlikely as a factor, but prolonged hardship had undoubtedly affected his health. Arnoux’ comments strongly suggest Cuenot’s mental balance had deteriorated, an observation echoed two years later in 1859 by Jean Roy – another newly arrived missionary – who claimed that Cuenot suffered “an illness which has totally overwhelmed his senses”. But illness may not have been the underlying reason. Indeed, Cuenot was not the first apostolic vicar to treat new arrivals with contempt in a situation, as alluded to by both Roy and Arnoux, where inter-generational tensions between the apostolic vicar and more recent arrivals played a crucial role. A full generation of evangelical expansion and frenzied anti-Nguyễn, pro-martyr propaganda in the French Church separated Cuenot from Roy – born in 1831, the year Cuenot first arrived in Cochinichina – but it is almost certain that the vicar apostolic insisted young missionaries conform to his style of administration that enhanced the role and prestige of local priests.

The apostolic vicar had lived among local Catholics for nearly thirty years, virtually his entire adult life. If he remained French at heart, Cuenot undoubtedly also identified very closely with the friendships and personal ties he had developed over long years living in Bình Định. In contrast, new young missionaries had been raised during the Catholic Church’s political re-emergence in the late 1830s and 1840s and trained in an atmosphere of triumphalist nationalism in the early 1850s under Napoleon III. They

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11 Ibid.
viewed the non-Catholic Asian world from a very different perspective. Not only had several decades of nationalist thought led to progressively racist views of non-European societies, but from the late 1850s the rise of Church support for French imperial activity (particularly where it benefited the missions) had broadened conceptions of mission roles in ways that would have been unthinkable several decades earlier. Catholic publications on Vietnam in the months leading up to the invasion in 1858 illustrate this development.

Rooted in the contemporary sentiment of 1858, the Jesuit publication, *Mission de la Cochinchine et du Tonkin*, described the escalation of violence towards Catholics under “Tu-Duc”. In a figurative call to arms for support, the tome ended with an exhortation:

> Could these examples of Christian magnanimity [martyrdom] rouse the faith and inflame courage among the Catholics of Europe; could they also give rise in some hearts the desire to go to the help of these desolated Churches, [i.e., to become missionaries]... to combat [and] share their triumphs! [and martyrs].

The MEP produced its own work in the same year, *Voyage dans l’Indochine*, authored by Bouilliveaux, a missionary who travelled through the Cochinchina and Cambodia missions in the late 1840s and early 1850s. Full of condescending descriptions of local Catholics, this travelogue emphasises the civilisational gulf between European and Vietnamese society. On one occasion, Bouilliveaux mockingly described how a Catholic literatus boasted that Vietnam had no rival in the “military sciences”. The missionary’s “incredulity” apparently irritated the scholar “animating his patriotic fervour”. A work with a similar title, *La Cochinchine et le Tonquin*, published by Eugène Vueillot in early 1859, shortly after the commencement of the expedition, advanced a correlation between France’s national interest and its moral imperative to act on behalf of “Christian civilisation”.

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16 Ibid., p.355.
18 Ibid. p.46.
Veuillot emphasised the need for France’s “moral superiority” in the Asia region, to ensure the safety of Catholics and offset British supremacy.²⁰

These and similar works, which openly promoted close associations between French imperialism and mission expansion, reflected the nineteenth century shift in Church attitudes that coincided with resurgent French nationalism. Whereas missionaries of the 1820s eschewed involvement in national politics, men such as Mgr. Pellerin, who lobbied directly at the court of Napoleon III for military intervention in Vietnam, saw no conflict between spiritual and political interests. Cuenot’s generation, while modernising in spirit, continued to view with repugnance the MEP’s closer engagement with the state. Earlier in the decade, Lefèbvre indicated this shift in a response to a series of reforms initiated after a corruption scandal rocked the MEP organisation in Paris. Lefèbvre had no qualms in hotly denouncing those confreres, who had been guilty of “breathing the pestilential air of French politics”.²¹ It is unclear to whom Lefèbvre is referring, but it is almost certain that he had confreres such as Pellerin in his sights; men who had more of an interest in glorifying the mission name than ensuring the well-being of Catholics on the ground.

New arrivals to the mission in the late 1850s may not have had any direct involvement in the MEP’s political lobbying, but their writings suggest they certainly shared the nationalistic and racist views of contemporary French politics. Although a gross oversimplification to suggest that all missionaries shared similar views, it is worth noting this distinction between the generations. Central to Cuenot’s reforms of 1841 had been the aim to transfer greater responsibility and authority to the local priesthood, and by the mid-1850s his plan had achieved great success. But by then the result was not received favourably by many younger missionaries who saw themselves as inherently superior, both ecclesiastically and racially. The conflict of views between generations impacted directly on mission activity and relationships on the ground. Against the background of an impending French assault it magnified tensions, and not only between French missionaries.

The awkward situation described by Arnoux was minor compared to that experienced by Herrengt, whose astonishing confrontation with a local priest provides a tantalising indication that power struggles had started to gnaw away at the stability of

²⁰ Ibid., p.ii.
²¹ Lefèbvre, MEP 755, 26/02/1852.
the East Cochin mission. Based in a Binh Dinh chrétienté, Herrengt’s brush with a local priest, Father Khoa, throws into perspective one set of local views of the unfolding turmoil. Writing in early 1859, Herrengt described how the priest retired to his apartment one evening, where for the following half hour:

He read from a lecture (soliloque) in annamitico-latin [quốc ngữ] about the hypocrites who come here to preach the religion, who call the warships of their country to come and massacre thousands of annamites, [and] who rejoice when they hear that many have been killed; who are well-versed in talking about war but who know not how to speak of anything else.22

It is interesting that Khoa had apparently been reading from a written document, not simply delivering a verbal diatribe, thus raising the question as to the authorship of this seemingly anti-French lecture. It appears most likely it was written by either Khoa or another priest, suggesting such views may have circulated among local clergy. When the missionary did not respond to the attack clearly directed at him, Khoa continued baiting. Khoa switched his withering attack to reading a lesson from the book of “Christian perfection” (sách trọn lành) – a text used to teach neophytes – on the punishments (“khôn nạn), which await those who do not know how to strongly repress all their wicked inclinations (các tình mê rất xấu).” The message of the “lesson” did not fail to infuriate Herrengt.

The next day tensions escalated out of control when Khoa openly provoked a dispute by smashing bottles of Mass wine at the presbytery kitchen. Herrengt arrived near the scene to see Khoa wielding a large chopping knife, threatening all who crossed his path. The priest directed insults at Herrengt, who kept a respectable distance and called Phước, another priest, to help prevent a rampage. Khoa ranted uncontrollably and demanded the mission’s dogs to be brought to him, promising greater violence if ignored.23 Eventually a dog was brought out – Herrengt noted ironically the animal was “of European race” – and to their horror Khoa seized it and “furiously” hacked its head off, breaking the chopping knife. The priest then dumped the dog’s corpse at Herrengt’s

22 Herrengt, AMEP 750, 14/01/1859 [copy], no.100.
23 Here a note in the text remarks that the “dogs were of European race”. 

- 165 -
Shocked by the display, and undoubtedly fearful for his life, the missionary sought safety elsewhere with the help of a lay leader.

The cause of this remarkable episode is not clear in Herrengt’s recollection of events, but according to the missionary the outburst and the violence were premeditated. Herrengt suggested in his final remarks in the letter that the confrontation arose from long simmering tensions within the mission caused by Cuenot’s style of governance. The apostolic vicar, he noted, followed a policy of “divide and rule” within the mission, he “humbles the missionaries in sight of the indigens so that they [the missionaries] will be unable to move without creating dissension with them [local priests], and in this way he controls one and the other completely under his sceptre.”

Cuenot’s increasingly unpredictable behaviour, indeed his personal style of administration, combined with the increased authority enjoyed by the local clergy, increasingly placed newly arrived missionaries in difficult positions. Indeed, as Herrengt’s own personal analysis shows, new missionaries believe, whether true or not, that the long term reforms in favour of local priests had led to an unofficial demotion of foreign missionaries in the running of the vicariate.

Herrengt’s confrontation with Khoa may have been an extreme incident, but nevertheless it shatters the illusion that the mission enjoyed uncritical popular support among Catholic communities and unquestioned control over them. It also challenges the view that local congregations viewed Catholicism specifically as a French religion.

Khoa’s comments indicate the awareness of a real distinction between French interests and the tenets of the religion. The confrontation may have been a purely personal matter between Khoa and Herrengt, but given the tense situation and the disdain expressed by other missionaries towards Cuenot and local priests in East Cochinchina, I believe such tensions were not likely to be isolated.

III. Denunciations

Missionaries had every reason to fear confrontations, whether with non-Catholics or those within their own chrétientés. The risk of denunciation to a nearby mandarin posed

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24 In Herrengt’s translation Khoa yelled “go with your master, you belong to the cő [master]” (“di với chú máy, máy là ců,cő!”).
25 Ibid.
one of the most feared hazards for all associated with the mission. For over two decades the threat of capture, for missionaries and local clergy, had been lessened by careful arrangements with local officials, through local middleman, with the help of regular payments. But the balance between a mandarin’s bought accommodation towards a cleric in his jurisdiction and increased bureaucratic pressure from above to unearth foreign and local priests became more and more unpredictable towards the end of the 1850s. As the situation became more volatile, the threat of denunciation increased.

In the case of Mạc Bác chrétienté in early 1853, for example, the actions of an absconded Catholic soldier originally from nearby Cái Nhũm – located next to Cái Mon village – led to the capture and execution of two highly respected Church members. Burdened with heavy gambling debts, the soldier, “bép Nhãn” (first-class soldier Nhãn), sought to borrow money from congregation funds. Unsuccessful in his attempts to win the sympathy of a visiting priest by the name of Father Lưu, he conspired with two others from the village and travelled to Vĩnh Long to report the priest’s presence to officials.27 Shortly after, militia arrived to search the village, capturing another priest Philippe Minh and arresting the elderly chrétienté head Joseph Lưu.

In the late 1850s, such incidents increased and became a constant threat as a number of communities and Catholics were denounced to prefectural authorities in the form of anonymous letters. In late 1857, Lefèvre’s Collège at Thị Nghè near Saigon was apparently denounced numerous times by letters delivered anonymously to the prefect’s office at Tân Bình. On one occasion, a soldier intercepted one of the letters and took it to the chrétienté head in return for a small bribe. The identity of the complainant was unfortunately not revealed.28 Further letters continued to be sent to authorities and eventually in late 1858 officials launched searches to capture Lefèvre. The Collège was forced to disperse, with all students fleeing to an isolated location in Biên Hòa province.29 Although the details of these accusations remained a mystery to missionaries, suspicion often pointed to disgruntled or angry Catholics or apostates, as one of the most famous instances of the times illustrates.

27 Matthieu Đúc, Hạnh Cha MINH và Lãi Gấm Tử đạo là hai vị Â THÁNH thứ nhất Địa phận Nam Kỳ [Dear victims of the religion Father Minh and pilot Gấm the first two martyrs of Cochinchina], (Saigon: Imprimerie de la Mission à Tân Định, 1902), p.19-20.
29 Lefèvre, “Vicariate Apostolique de la Cochinchine Occidentale, 1858”, AMEP 755, no.124.
Eight months before his confrontation with Father Khoa, Herrengt reported that an unknown village official, a “chức viéc”, of a chrétienté had betrayed mission activities near Huế, in an “anonymous letter” to capital officials. According to Herrengt, the “Judas” named “all the Christians in the capital with an interest in the mission, and accused several mandarins of allowing themselves to gain from the money of Christians.”\(^30\) In the recriminations that followed, a number of mandarins were demoted and some fifty Catholics were arrested. This denunciation led to the arrest and execution of Hồ Đình Hy, the senior Board of Works official in charge of royal embroidery.\(^31\) In a related incident, Sohier, then hiding in Di Loan in Quảng Trị, was also denounced.\(^32\)

From mid-1858, as the political situation shifted from relative calm to uncertainty, local-level official tolerance for and accommodation of missionaries and priests gradually evaporated. As late as 1858 many Catholics could still live in mixed communities in far southern Vietnam in relative safety from threat. However, this changed dramatically after the Franco-Spanish assault on Đà Nẵng in September. Officials then launched a number of raids on chrétientés throughout the region. Borelle, in Cái.Mon, Vĩnh Long province, reported his community suffered a serious attack by the district mandarin resulting in the arrest and punishment of four people: two nuns, a village head and young man.\(^33\) An even more devastating event occurred in the first week of January 1859 at Đậu Ngưc on Cù Lao Giêng island upriver from Sa Đéc. In his description of the attack, composed a week after the events occurred, Jean Pernot explained how the upheaval caused by the French invasion drove a wedge between Catholics and non-Catholics.\(^34\)

Pernot had lived in the region for over five years and administered numerous chrétientés around the Cambodian frontier area without encountering much danger from local authorities. The chrétienté in which he was based, Đậu Ngưc, comprised around 450 converts and was surrounded by a larger non-Catholic population, that, according to Pernot’s estimate, numbered some 3,000. But far from living in fear of arrest and repression, Đậu Ngưc’s Catholics enjoyed relative tolerance by their non-Catholic neighbours. However, this accommodation was not without its dangers. For much of

\(^{30}\) Herrengt, *AMEP* 750, 15/04/1858, no.95.

\(^{31}\) See chapter 5.

\(^{32}\) Herrengt, *AMEP* 750, 15/04/1858, no.95.


\(^{34}\) Pernot, *AMEP* 755, 29/01/1859, no. 128.
1858, as Pernot began his account, a small "band of brigands" from the village had attempted several times to break into his house and on one occasion had gone so far as to poison his dogs. Frustrated in their attempts, the "brigands" then attempted to rouse the attention of local officials to Pernot’s presence. At first they made the mistake of petitioning the prefect of Châu Đốc, who responded to their accusations by sentencing two of the three to a public beating. According to reports of their treatment, the prefect openly doubted their honesty, noting that it would be impossible for a Westerner to stay in a “province inundated a quarter of the year and where mosquitos are in such great number”.35

Beaten but not defeated, the group persisted and approached village and canton-level officials from whom they expected a better reception. They managed to rouse the nearby canton chief to search the village in the middle of the night. Emboldened, they petitioned the highest local official, the district mandarin (tri luyễn), who also unsuccessfully searched the chrétienté. On both occasions Pernot escaped capture with minimal fuss. In fact his boasting about his good fortune during these early searches strongly suggests these local officials ignored his presence.36

Our weakness appears all the same to be our strength, and for us a reason for our safety, because Đâu Nước is a small Xtienté of 450 inhabitants enclosed amidst a pagan village of more than 3000 souls, and in general this small Xtienté is thus lost among the pagans, not stirred by the suspicions and the fears of the mandarins unlike certain large chrétientés which form villages inscribed on the state registers (rôle de l’état) and in which the heads are all Christians.37

In late 1858, as the conflict escalated in Đà Nẵng, the court issued new measures to root out Catholics from their relative isolation. More customs mandarins, for example, appeared on the Mekong, and in the provinces officials deployed small groups of militia with wooden crosses to summarily force suspected Catholics to recant. It was at this point that Pernot’s band of serial harassers worked out how to make a claim on which officials had no choice but to act. They reported that the missionary had stored a cache of rifles and weapons that would be issued to local Catholics, they averred, at the right moment for an uprising to support the French invaders. The accusation was bogus, but

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
no official could dare ignore it. Late in the night of January 7 some 300 militia and officers swooped on the village. Moments before the attack a neighbour rushed to Pernot’s residence and warned him of the danger. He escaped to the safety of nearby rice fields where he watched disaster unfold in what had to this point been a relatively peaceful community.

Soldiers attacked Catholic households by first throwing firecrackers into doorways. Then, storming in with swords drawn, they turned each house inside out in search of religious objects, such as books and medals, in order to incriminate the household. According to Pernot they singled out the houses of the family of the congregation’s elderly catechist Emmanuel Lê Văn Phùng, on account of the wealth available for looting. The goods taken from Emmanuel Phùng’s house alone are surprising: “silver, ligatures [of copper cash], silk were among the least of the objects carried off, they also snatched from the women their bracelets and their gold ear-rings (boucles)”.38 Apart from deflating the illusion that only the poor and itinerants joined the religion, the sample of expensive goods noted by Pernot also demonstrates that Catholics engaged in a wide range of commercial activities.39 Over the past decade Phùng had been a major contributor to the mission, funding the construction of a college and by providing a house for religious ceremonies. He appears to have been the instrumental link between the community and authorities in the negotiation of safety from searches, and in persuading local officials to turn a blind eye to the “religious contraband” in the village, that is visiting missionaries.40

The soldiers arrested Emmanuel Phùng, his sons and a brother, along with a newly ordained priest, Pierre Nguyễn Văn Quí, placing them all in chains and stocks.41 Officials also rounded up a further thirty villagers, probably mostly men, and marched the prisoners to Châu Đốc. As for the expectation of capturing Pernot, the mandarins in charge of the raid claimed that the Westerner had simply “physically disappeared”.42

In following days, Pernot was spirited away by servants to another chrétienté, but the people of Dâu Nước continued to suffer. The ties that had bound Catholics and

38 Ibid.
39 Could this reference to silver and silk suggest Emmanuel Phùng amassed his wealth through the silk trade?
41 Unfortunately, few biographic details are available on this priest. He was probably in his early 30s – he had only recently been ordained – and had studied at Penang.
42 Pernot, *AMEP* 755, 29/01/1859, no. 128.
non-Catholics for so long began to unravel. The trauma of the raid split the community in two. Pernot reported that immediately before the attack some Catholics had entrusted their precious belongings to non-Catholic neighbours with whom they were “on good terms”. Afterwards, however, many simply refused to return the items to their rightful owners. At the Chậu Đốc prefectural lock-up a large number of Catholics recanted, but eleven refused and subsequently nine were sent into exile. Officials executed the remaining two, Father Pierre Quí and Emmanuel Phượng, at the end of July 1859. Although the prefectural officials exercised the full weight of the edicts proscribing the religion, they ignored the more recent laws that stipulated the bodies of priests be dismembered and thrown into the sea, permitting the devastated chrétienté to reclaim them for burial.

This episode provides a striking impression of how the uncertainties of the period dragged relatively calm communities into a mire of confusion and distrust. Until this point most far southern chrétientés had co-habited with mainstream communities with little conflict. In fact, as Pernot highlighted, living among non-Catholics paradoxically afforded Đâu Nước’s Catholics a higher degree of security from the threat of official interference than those living in all-Catholic settlements. Chrétientés also continued to take advantage of private arrangements with local officials, even as high as district and prefectural mandarins. Authorities administering socially and culturally mixed populations far away from the capital, as in frontier Chậu Đốc, preferred compromise and accommodation to obedience to divisive court orders, and made great efforts to promote cohesion in a region that faced the constant threat of ethnic violence. In fact, the French invasion itself showed how close to the surface were the discontents of local non-Vietnamese groups here when a general uprising broke out among Cham and Khmer communities in the An Giang province border region in 1859. By the end of that year it was spreading out of control.

Provoked by the French invasion at Đà Nẵng, the deteriorating political situation had dire consequences for grassroots society. As anxiety spread throughout the

43 Ibid.
44 A funeral and wake were held over a day and night, and, in a sign of how local belief surrounding executions had become common practice, the priest who had taken charge of the district made a “large distribution of cotton soaked with [Quí’s] blood to satisfy”, in Borelle’s words, “the pious eagerness (avidité) of the faithful”. Borelle, AMEP 755, no.181 (The account is unfortunately undated, but appears to have been composed in early 1860).
45 Miche, AMEP 765, 25/11/1858, no.42. See also, DNTL XXIX, p.97.
The End of Pre-Colonial Catholicism in Cochinchina

The kingdom, denunciations increased and the margin for compromise and accommodation narrowed. Indeed, Pernot’s account of the Đâu Nước raid is highly reminiscent of the eruption of violence in the aftermath of the 1847 Lapierre expedition. But in contrast to the late 1840s, the French invasion created unprecedented and irreversible social division.

IV. Invasion: Rule and Alternative Responses
In early February 1859, several weeks after the attack on Đâu Nước, a squadron of French corvettes sailed up the Soai Râp River to Saigon where, following a four-day battle, they crushed the defending garrison. The attack created chaos and, as Pernot reported, widespread “confusion and inexpressible disorder” followed as people fled the area surrounding Saigon.46 The court responded bitterly to the news, orchestrating a wide-reaching repression of Catholics in the Six Provinces. In a memorial dated May 1859, Vĩnh Long’s province magistrate, Lê Đình Đức, claimed that many Catholics had offered assistance to the invaders, taken advantage of non-Catholics and acted as spies for the Westerners.47 In response, the court issued an edict ordering a general containment. The different measures applied provide an interesting insight into court distinctions between Catholics at this point, and a sign of a dramatic descent into mass-violence.

First, the court ordered that all who had gone to the aid of the Westerners be rounded up with their parents, wives and children and be placed in prison. People who had not yet rallied to the invaders were to be prevented from doing so at all costs. However, in an admission that not all Catholics posed a real danger, the edict added that well-behaved community leaders should be secretly detained – perhaps suggesting they should be spied on – to stop them from travelling around the region or reaching the enemy camp, but that the elderly, the young, and women who were living peacefully and observing the law (giữ pháp) were to be left alone. Those who caused a hindrance or appeared to be waiting eagerly for the invaders were to be moved to villages where no Catholics lived.48 The current circumstances made a comprehensive campaign of

46 Pernot, AMEP 755, 22/03/1859, no.132.
47 DNTL XXIX, p.35.
48 Ibid., pp.35-36.
searches and arrests impossible. Faced with widespread devastation the court resorted to pragmatic measures to maintain its grip.

This edict’s noting that some Catholics lived peacefully and observed the law (yên phân giữ phép) is the first such admission in the dynastic chronicles of which I am aware.\(^{49}\) For over two decades, official documents had promoted the view that followers of the religion became mesmerised (mê hoạch), and thus irrational, by its practices. The qualified suggestion that Catholics might uphold the law was unprecedented and, significantly, is reiterated in later lines with the ordering of provincial officials to maintain vigilance over Catholic who observe the laws and whose “hearts had not changed” (sinh lồng).\(^{50}\) Finally, the edict ends with a distinction in methods of confinement regarding the proximity of Catholic communities to the invading forces. For those living far from the enemy’s control it ordered local officials to place Catholics under house arrest.\(^{51}\) But Catholics living in villages neighbouring French control, which applied to Biên Hòa and around Định Tương (My Tho), were to be moved to other villages, presumably among non-Catholics. This last measure laid the grounds for the large-scale, forced resettlement of Catholics in the Biên Hòa and Bà Rịa area into makeshift camps.

In October, the court ordered prefectural officials to create a census of all Catholics in their districts, including their land holdings and other assets.\(^{52}\) This direction was further expanded with the provision to round up and incarcerate all male Catholics. Herrengt provides a detailed report of the repercussions.\(^{53}\) In January 1860, he noted, officials had arrested all the principal members of each chrétienté in Quảng Nam, Quảng Ngãi and Phú Yên. Officials obliged all villages to prepare a census of Catholic families and their “servants, goods and property”, something that further demonstrated that all Catholics did not live on the margins of society. Shortly after, district mandarins visited each Catholic community to force all men from the age of 16

\(^{49}\) Ibid.
\(^{50}\) Ibid.
\(^{51}\) Ibid, p.36
\(^{52}\) DNTL XXIX, p.75.
\(^{53}\) Bùi Quy assumed the prestigious governorial role of Bình Định and Phú Yên after the death of Pham Khôi in mid-1859 (DNTL XXIX, p.53; see also LT, vol.4, p.105). The Veritable Records note Bùi Ngọc Quy as the provisional governor, Hồ đốc, of both Phú Yên and Bình Định (DNTL XXIX, p.105), but his entry in the Official Biographies records that he served from 1859, Từ Đức year 12, as Governor “tuấn phủ hồ lý tổng đốc”, a position which may be translated as Governor assisting the Governor-general (LT, vol. 4, p.103).
to recant. Herrengt claims that "here and there only 2 or 3 were weak". Nevertheless, many villages suffered enormously from the measures. Defiant community leaders who refused to recant faced arrest and imprisonment. Placing enormous strain on the broader population, officials dispersed some prisoners "one by one in pagan villages", while others ended up as exiles in the highland frontier citadels. Meanwhile, the measures left many chrétientés vulnerable to attack by bandits. Herrengt reported that in many communities "only some men remain, those who are not strong, or those men omitted from the census, [thus] women and children are left without protection from the vexation of pagans".54

Despite the turmoil in Đà Nẵng and Gia Định, officials in some areas still preferred to maintain harmony in their jurisdictions by negotiating with chrétientés. One prominent example of moderate treatment occurred in Binh Định province under the governorship of Bùi Quý. Again according to Herrengt, at the time of the first efforts to round up chrétienté heads, officials in Binh Định arrested a relatively small number of only forty. Moreover, instead of forcing these men to recant, Governor Quý apparently sought to negotiate a course of action with the group to help fend off the French invasion. Assembling these prisoners in early January, the Governor presented two proposals, one, as recorded by Herrengt, was that they use their influence to lead a following of local Catholics "to Tourane (Đà Nẵng) to fight and drive out the French", or alternatively, that several of the group should attempt to "surrender themselves to the [French] ships and expose to them the critical situation of Christians, and beg them to put an end [to the attack] and withdraw."55 Governor Quý decided that the second option was the more appropriate and delegated a group of five for the undertaking, even going so far as to dispatch a courier to Huế to inform the court of his proposal.

There can be little doubt that all those involved or who heard of this exchange had serious misgivings about its practicability. Herrengt was sceptical of the plan and interpreted the measure as being aimed at simply singling out the most prominent community leaders in the province for further punishment. He therefore approached a local official for his opinion on the plan. In response, the official, who may have been a Catholic, suggested that the proposal was intended as a humane measure aimed at

54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
stalling “for time and to delay executing” the harsh anti-Catholic edicts.\textsuperscript{56} For his pains, Herrengt reported, Governor Quỹ suffered a severe reprimand and a suspension of his salary for a year as punishment for his “moderation in the execution of the new edict”.\textsuperscript{57}

The coincidence between Bùi Quỹ’s appointment at Binh Định and his “moderate” treatment of Catholics is remarkable. Under Minh Mạng, Bùi Quỹ had enjoyed a stellar rise in the bureaucracy among a number of handpicked graduates from the Red River Delta provinces. At the height of the anti-Catholic campaign of the late 1830s, he had held prestigious posts as a chief lawmaker and magistrate at Huế in the Punishments Board (Hình bô). However, late in the reign his career suffered a noticeable setback which, court documents secretly copied by a mission sympathiser suggest, most likely came as a consequence of his involvement in the sentencing and execution of François Jaccard in 1839.\textsuperscript{58} An elder and highly experienced official by 1860, Quỹ’s punishment for being involved in bringing about Jaccard’s execution may have softened his attitude towards Catholics, or lessened his loyalty towards to implementing such measures, especially if the escalating repression conflicted with his own views of what was appropriate as a law-maker. But it is also likely that another issue plaguing the central provinces played a decisive role. For much of 1859, as the Franco-Spanish attack stalled at Đà Nẵng, the French Navy’s dominance of coastal shipping had aggravated a dangerous shortage in rice in the capital prefectures.\textsuperscript{59} The shortage also affected Binh Định province, which for the previous year had suffered a serious drought.\textsuperscript{60} Perhaps concerned for what devastation famine would cause to his province, Quỹ may have attempted to avoid fully implementing the new edicts in order to reduce the risk of instability. In most areas, however, the invasion had exhausted what good-will and compromise had lingered from more peaceful times, and for many mandarins the culmination of events precluded any further negotiation.

The moderation enjoyed in Binh Định under Governor Quỹ in early 1860 ended abruptly with his death in April 1861, when he was replaced by Nguyễn Đức Hữu.\textsuperscript{61} Leading up to this point the situation in Binh Định and the neighbouring provinces had

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} See chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{59} \textit{DNTL XXIX}, p.74.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., p.105.
\textsuperscript{61} See \textit{DNTL XXIX}, p.202; \textit{LT IV}, p.103; and Herrengt, \textit{AMEP} 750, 19/07/1861, no.121.
The End of Pre-Colonial Catholicism in Cochinchina

become increasingly unstable. In early March, following the defeat of Nguyên forces around Saigon, soldiers fleeing from the conflict now reportedly clogged the main routes leading north. In mid July, the sight off the coast of a convoy of ten French warships sparked a wave of fear throughout the province and, as Herrengt noted, anxious rumours swirled regarding their final destination. A second wave of attack on the metropolitan provinces fuelled concerns. The belief spread “that they were returning to Tourane (Đà Nẵng) harbour, [and] that some [ships] had already arrived at the mouth of the river leading to the capital.” To Herrengt the anxiety this caused was palpable; such rumours had a powerful effect on officials and communities and did much to intensify alarm.

Coinciding with this development, and Bùi Quý’s death, Nguyên Đức Hữu’s appointment saw the full implementation of the court’s draconian measures in the province. When he arrived in Bình Định he apparently expressed great surprise that the edicts had not been fully implemented. A veteran official openly hostile to the mission, he had been previously based in Quảng Nam and had first-hand experience of the devastation caused by the French invasion around Đà Nẵng. In the following eighteen months, Governor Hữu led a ferocious campaign which completely broke the back of the mission presence in the province and all but decimated the Catholic population.

Writing from Saigon over a year later in January 1862, Herrengt reported on Mgr. Cuenot’s capture and death in prison the previous November. At the end of October, a raid on his chrétienté of Gò Thị had forced the elderly apostolic vicar to flee to nearby rice-fields, but after three days of hiding he decided, perhaps from hunger or sheer desperation, to surrender to the militia. He was carried to the provincial capital in a small bamboo cage where he was interrogated. Shortly after his arrival, however, he fell ill with dysentery. He died a day before the order for his execution arrived.

In the wake of this capture there followed a general terrorisation of the Catholic population. Of the twenty-two priests present in the vicariate at the time he fled in

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62 Herrengt, AMEP 750, 3/04/1861, no.118.
63 Herrengt, AMEP 750, 19/07/1861, no.121.
64 Ibid.
65 Herrengt, AMEP 750, 31/01/1862 [copy], no.241.
66 The capture is recorded in the Nguyên chronicles complete with a list of the rewards offered to those involved in his capture, DNTL XXIX, p.245.
August 1861, Herrengt reported that thirteen had been captured, two had disappeared without a trace, six remained relatively safe in the highlands mission to the west, and a single priest had managed to escape to safety in the south. Furthermore, he reported bleakly, officials had interned the province’s 250-plus Latin students and nuns and its 13,000 Catholics. All had been tattooed with the characters tà dao, perverse religion, on their faces. The whole population was then apparently dispersed to non-Catholics villages: “by fraction proportionate to the importance of the village and enclosed in miserable hangars around which were piled all sorts of combustible materials in order to burn the prisoners [alive] when the day came”.\(^67\) It is unclear when exactly the “right day” was to be, but by the time Herrengt wrote this letter he had received reports that two villages had set their camps alight to relieve themselves of the “corvee duty” of being responsible for the Catholics’ custody.

From this point, for over a year, the archival records offer few details of events in Binh Dinh province. The absence of missionaries on the ground or priests to act as informants must leave us to guess at the magnitude of the chaos there. Thus it is to West Cochinchna that I turn.

V. The Bien Hoa Massacres: January 1862

In the Six Provinces, the February 1859 attack at Saigon set in motion a series of events that led to widespread devastation. Undoubtedly the greatest catastrophe of the invasion was the spread of famine throughout the region from early 1860. Once a vocal advocate of a military intervention in the region, Borelle, who was based in Cáy Mon, now poured scorn on the Admiralty’s failure to deal a decisive blow. Living at the centre of a usually bustling crossroads of commerce, he reported that the French presence in Saigon – which had not moved at any great distance into the outlying countryside – had prevented the transport of goods, particularly “into provinces which do not have rice fields”.\(^68\) Borelle was probably referring to the more watery areas of the western delta where little land had yet been cleared and established for rice cultivation. By early 1860, he claimed, thousands had died of starvation. Horrified by the tragedy he reported that “there are entire provinces where poor people as well as the rich are reduced to

\(^{67}\) Herrengt. AMEP 750, 31/01/1862 [copy], no.241.

\(^{68}\) Borelle, AMEP 755, 7/03/1860, no.152.
consuming the grass of the fields and tree roots." Making matters worse, similar to the measures applied in Binh Định, officials had over previous months confiscated the boats of Catholics throughout the region, effectively preventing many from making a livelihood. Officials continued to confine chrétientés to detention within their villages. In most communities headmen had been arrested and taken to prefectural centres where they were then relocated for surveillance in "pagan villages". Less than two months later, in July, Borello himself died, probably of starvation, sharing the same fate as many others around him.

As in Binh Định this period saw the end of moderation and accommodation among low-level officials for Catholics in their jurisdictions. At this point reports arrived in Saigon that nearly four hundred Catholics had been interned in makeshift prisons in nearby districts. Over a number of months officials had progressively rounded up large communities and had secured their internment among non-Catholic communities. Although a small figure in early 1860, by the end of 1861 this number had apparently ballooned. Reports reached Saigon in October 1861 that in Phúc Tuy prefecture, an area encompassing a number of old chrétientés, some 2000 Catholic men, women, and children had been detained in camps built hastily from wood and materials taken from locals’ dismantled houses. One of the camps, at Phước Lệ, held only men, while the other three, located at Long Kiên, Long Diên and Phước Thọ, held "women, children, the elderly and the infirm". Mission reports note that the news of this development was conveyed by a "pagan canton chief", who was appalled at the conditions and had appealed directly to the French commander, Admiral Charner, to resolve the situation. According to Gauthier, detainees had started to die of "hunger and misery", with disease a major factor.

Late in the year Admiral Bonard launched a campaign to destroy resistance in Biên Hòa and, after a short thrust into the province with reinforced troop numbers in early December, the French captured the citadel and advanced to take the rest of the province by mid January. In retreat, Governor Nguyễn Đức Hoản fled the area with the
remaining Nguyễn forces, taking refuge further south in Phúc Tuy prefecture. Before fleeing this area in later January, he ordered the torching of the Catholic internment camps.

Lefèbvre provided the earliest account of the catastrophe. Writing a week after the first massacre at Phước Lê prison in Bà Rịa, the apostolic vicar relied on reports given by refugee Catholics, many of whom had been injured in the savage reprisals, as well as accounts from French officers. The letter is not addressed to a particular audience and in contrast to later polished accounts written for the *Annals* it represents a frank report of events. It is highly emotive; Lefèbvre had had close contact with these communities for over fifteen years and his anguish at their massacre is palpable. As French forces advanced to within sight of Bà Rịa around January 7, Lefèbvre wrote, officials leading royal forces ordered soldiers to set fire to the buildings. When French forces arrived on the scene they found a mess of “cinders, scraps of half-roasted human flesh and an immense mass of corpses and burnt bones.”

According to Herrengt, one of the survivors, a sixteen year old girl, escaped the blaze by hiding in a tree for several days.

Shortly after, Lefèbvre sent a priest to the area to catalogue the damage. He counted 232 bodies at the site of one prison, and only 26 men who had escaped, several with “light injuries”. Later research by Errard, an MEP missionary, placed the total at 248 for this prison alone. In the other three prisons, a total of 149 were killed. A smaller massacre also took place around this time in the neighbouring province of Định Tương, in Bà Giong chrétienté.

The prevailing explanation for the mass-violence of the invasion period in modern scholarship has generally referred on long-standing divisions between Catholics and non-Catholics. In particular, Nicole-Dominique Lê has argued that both Catholics’ physical isolation and separate settlement from mainstream villages played a major role in the massacres.

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74 DNTL XXIX, p.256.
75 Lefèbvre, *AMEP* 755, 15/01/1862 no. 234.
76 Ibid.
77 Herrengt, *AMEP* 755, 27/12/1861 no. 225.
79 Ibid.
role.\textsuperscript{81} The crucial mistake in this analysis, however, is the disregard for fluidity in relations in society and between communities and officials. As shown earlier, not all southern Catholics lived in closed villages away from mainstream society. Except for a few notable exceptions, Cái Mon, Mạc Bác and several hamlets in Biên Hòa, the majority of chrétientés shared the same settlements as non-Catholics. Moreover, community relations had, until the French invasion, been defined by a high degree of accommodation and compromise. In fact, a close look at court conceptions of Catholics refutes the view that Huế uniformly viewed Catholics as French surrogates.

As expounded by Minh Mạng in the late 1830s, Huế conceived Catholics as followers of a “perverse religion” (tà đạo). They were seen not simply as criminals but as redeemable subjects who had been “mesmerised”, mê, had lost their human reason (vô lý), and needed to be restored to the “orthodox way” (chính đạo) in order for them to return to the long accepted customs and morals (phong hóa) of the kingdom.\textsuperscript{82} As Huế continued to perceive Catholics as subjects of Nguyễn authority, their refusal to recant, which amounted to subversion, defined their behaviour as criminal. Yet pardon (tha tôi) always awaited those who chose to recant and returned to the orthodox way.\textsuperscript{83} In the 1840s, Thiệu Trị echoed this position, and made an astute distinction between types of followers.

There are individuals who follow the religion and have been dulled (u mê) and are not conscious (không tinh), and are resolved to punishment, [then there are] those who on the outside follow [the religion] but internally do not follow, but have not yet honestly shown repentance.\textsuperscript{84}

Shortly before his death in November 1847, he reiterated this difference but strikingly noted that not only had common people (tiểu dân) been mesmerised, so too had a number of officials (quán chức).\textsuperscript{85} During the Franco-Spanish invasion at Đà Nẵng in 1858, Tự Đức recognised that some Catholics posed less of a threat than others.\textsuperscript{86} Such nuanced perspectives at court certainly indicate different attitudes elsewhere in the


\textsuperscript{82} See for example Minh Mạng’s lengthy 1839 memorials where he describes the religion as contrary to acceptable orthodoxy, \textit{DNTL} XXI, pp.100-04, 177-80.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., pp.179.

\textsuperscript{84} \textit{DNTL} XXVI, p.276.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., p.385.

\textsuperscript{86} \textit{DNTL} XXIX, pp.35-36.
bureaucracy, among regional authorities, and in local society. But these views highlight the fact that, although the Nguyễn looked on Catholics with contempt, Christian disobedience of the anti-Catholic edicts did not preclude their identification with the local order. Indeed, in the cold light of day, when the collapse of law and order seemed imminent, the court continued to treat Catholics as criminals, not as religious renegades or French affiliates. Thus, in the early stages of the French invasion officials detained only certain community members, incarcerating larger numbers only as conflict intensified. Even so, the court continued to acknowledge the reality that some Catholics obeyed the law and posed a reduced threat to internal stability.

We need to be careful not to simplistically assume that the sole motivation for violence was a general ideological hatred of Catholics. On one hand, it is worth noting that despite the decimation of Catholics in Biên Hòa province, estimates for the vicariate’s Church population in the mid-1860s show that overall the mission in the far south remained relatively intact. Taking into consideration the steady rise in conversions that occurred in the three provinces ceded to the French after the treaty of Saigon in mid-1862, the size of the Catholic population in the Six Provinces in 1866 rested at around the same level as the pre-1862 level. Far from suggesting the mortality rate caused by the famine and invasion hostilities was insignificant, the mass-violence in this region was not quite as devastating as elsewhere, notably in the north of the kingdom where many thousands of Catholics disappeared. Further to this, the events of Biên Hòa do not appear to have been replicated elsewhere in the Six provinces. Vinh Long, an area also with a high concentration of Catholics, is an example. In a monograph of Bái Xan – a chrétienté neighbouring Cái Mon, near Vinh Long town – written in 1912, Father Bellocq described the less intense recriminations during the 1860 to 1862 period. Although officials rounded up and incarcerated the province’s Catholic notables and community heads, some communities managed to remain in hiding for months, thus averting similar disaster. If the accuracy of Bellocq’s 1912 account can be questioned by the decades separating him from the events he described,

87 A report to the Society of the Propagation of the Faith in 1866 recorded the population at 33,939, *AFP* XXXVIII, p.279, whereas the “pre-war” population reported by Lefèbvre in 1862 estimated the population at 32,000, Lefèbvre, *AMEP* 755, [no date], no.292.
the absence of any contemporary missionary’s report, indeed the silence of missionaries on events in this province, nevertheless strongly suggests lesser devastation.

On the other hand, several examples of official interactions with Catholics from the period adds colour to our understanding of what others have described as a black and white conflict. In late February 1861, the defeat of Nguyễn forces at Chí Hòa north of Saigon precipitated the slow retreat of Nguyễn forces from the region. It is with a little surprise that we learn from Mgr. Gauthier shortly after that Nguyễn Tri Phương, the field marshal commanding the defending army, accepted the services of Catholic physicians to treat his serious wounds suffered during the battle. Reporting back to the apostolic vicar, the “medicins chrétiens” verified Phương’s poor state, noting that his forearm had “fallen into purification” and the limb was “at the point of detaching”. The unusual circumstances of Phương’s treatment is in part made clearer by a similar episode a little later in the same year. In September, a disturbing report forced Tự Đức to demote and dismiss Quảng Bình’s governor (tuấn phủ) Nguyễn Văn Ứng and his finance administrator (bố chính), Tả Hữu Khuez, for not fully implementing the Catholic proscription. According to the memorial, the offenders had turned a blind eye to two Catholics, Chửong and Nhi, whom they allowed to travel freely through the province, in exchange for medicines for themselves and their families.

These examples appear at first incongruous in light of the tumultuous political situation, but this is largely because of distortions in the historical record caused by the conception of religious affiliation in nineteenth-century Vietnam as indistinguishable from political identity. To a large extent personal observance of Nguyễn ideological orthodoxy defined religious and spiritual attitudes among officials and communities in line with Huế’s orthodoxy. Nguyễn Đình Chiều, for example, undoubtedly felt a deep conviction that religious practice was a defining feature of cultural identity and political loyalty, and that Catholics thus posed a danger to the social order. But his views did not represent that of a majority. In the cases of field marshal Phương, governor Ứng and administrator Khuez, in contrast, the realities of everyday life and different personal beliefs overrode – but did not necessarily supersede – official loyalties. Just as such high-ranking officials found it expedient to employ, and felt no qualms at using,

89 Indeed, the Nguyễn chronicles note that Phương was retired to Bình Thuận for special treatment from physicians sent by Tự Đức, DNTL XXIX, p.216.
90 DNTL XXIX, pp.236-37.
Catholic physicians, compromise was a normal feature of local level relations. Court views certainly informed community perceptions, but they did not preclude accommodation. Apart from highlighting differences between court orthodoxy and local views, the examples suggest that differences in opinion and the zealousness of officials may have played a large part in the mass violence of late 1861 and 1862.

The most reasonable explanation for the mass-violence in Biên Hòa in January 1862 centres on the desperation of Nguyễn commanders in their military retreat from the region. It seems that at this stage of the French campaign, officials resorted to destroying potential support bases for the invaders, among which Catholics posed an obvious target. In 1861 and early 1862, as the Nguyễn army retreated from Biên Hòa, it concentrated its fury on neighbouring Catholic communities in Phúc Tuy prefecture. But if this accounts for the violence in Biên Hòa, it raises questions as to why these massacres were not repeated throughout the Six Provinces.

Adding to my argument that military expediency was the key reason for the mass violence is the fact that the Catholic community of in the north suffered disproportionately greater bloodshed during this period. In mid-1862, the dynastic chronicles recorded Nam Định’s Governor-general, Nguyễn Đình Tân – who had previously shown some tolerance to Catholics – had ordered the beheading of more than 4,800 Catholics over previous months.\(^{91}\) The reason for such horrific devastation was to prevent Catholics from joining rebels (giặc) who sought to take advantage of the serious instability in the region. In fact, an earlier report to the throne, dated January 1862 noted that Catholics had been rounded up and thrown into jail and then liquidated along with common criminals, murderers, thieves, even adulterers (gian phu).\(^{92}\) Court treatment of Catholics in Đông Kinh needs to be understood in the broader context of civil unrest. The greatest threat to law and order at the time was the spread of banditry and spot-fire uprisings.

Finally, one factor which might further explain the savagery in Biên Hòa was the individual predisposition of certain officials. While field marshal Phuang thought it appropriate to enlist the service of Catholic physicians, the retreating Governor linked to the Biên Hòa massacres, Nguyễn Đức Hoan, was of a far different political pedigree. His personal views on Catholics may have been a major factor in determining why the

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\(^{91}\) DNTL XXIX, p.318.

\(^{92}\) DNTL XXIX, p.274.
savagery here was far more pronounced in Biên Hòa than elsewhere in the Six Provinces. If we consider the different lives of these two officials we notice marked differences. To begin with, Phượng, born near Huế, entered the Nguyễn bureaucracy early in the Minh Mạng reign through the privilege of his personal connections.\(^{93}\) Although noting carefully that he lacked an academic qualification, his biography describes his rise first as a civil officer and later as a general. If practical military prowess defined Phượng’s later career credentials, academic merit underpinned Nguyễn Đức Hoan’s from the very beginning. In sharp contrast to Phượng, Hoan, a native of Quảng Trị, achieved the prestigious doctoral degree (tien si) in 1835 and enjoyed promotion based on his civil abilities. He was undoubtedly well educated and well-versed in the intellectual and ideological views propounded by the court during the 1820s and 1830.\(^{94}\) Thus, whereas Phượng felt no conflict in entertaining a lengthy conversation with a missionary – Lefèbvre in 1844 – or accepting treatment from Catholic physicians, Hoan was hardly likely, as one of the first tien si from his province, to entertain such unorthodoxy. Although the loyalty of the two officials to Huế is beyond question, Phượng’s flexibility stands in stark contrast to the violence carried out under Hoan’s orders.

Without seeking to diminish the suffering of communities during this period, I believe that the confusion caused by the unfolding invasion drama led to the massacres in Biên Hòa, not a deep-seated hatred of Catholics. Mainstream antipathy towards Catholics developed gradually as the impact of the invasion dragged the whole region into turmoil. At first widespread famine wreaked untold damage to large areas. Concurrently, the pressures exerted on the wider community by the dispersal and internment of Catholics undoubtedly exacerbated tensions. Then, as the French swept into Biên Hòa province in early 1862, the retreating army laid waste to the camps holding imprisoned Catholics. The break down of order makes minorities especially vulnerable to attack. Catholics’ ties with missionaries, whose compatriots were terrorising Gia Định, makes it remarkable that more local Catholics were not killed during this period.

\(^{93}\) LT III, p.427.
\(^{94}\) His family ties in Quảng Trị probably also contributed to his prospects, LT IV, pp.71-72.
VI. The Mission in 1863

The violence in Biên Hòa marked a shift in relations at the local level that would have far-reaching consequences for southern society. After decades of negotiation and relative tolerance between chrétientés and authorities, Catholics and non-Catholics, the recriminations resulted in irreparable divisions. From this point on, village level society became more noticeably divided along lines of religious difference between Catholics and non-Catholics than ever before. At the same time, the French consolidation in Saigon led to a substantive reconfiguration of power relations throughout the Six Provinces, thoroughly corrupting pre-colonial arrangements. French rule not only imposed a foreign political structure, it also forced a reordering of community loyalties and economic interests. Such important developments deserve their own study; here I can only highlight several changes in the early colonial period which anticipated those later developments. In particular, the advent of French rule precipitated a renegotiation of community interests that notably reshaped demographic settlement and altered relations between Catholics and non-Catholics.

One of the most revealing developments in the early months of the invasion was the mass arrival of Vietnamese Catholics in Saigon in the weeks following the invasion. In early 1859, after the fall of Gia Dinh citadel, Lefèbvre took the first opportunity to make his way to the security offered by the Franco-Spanish forces in Saigon. Following him, some 2,000 Catholics flooded into the deserted town, and a further 3,000 arrived shortly after.\(^95\) While Lefèbvre claimed the refugees were all Catholics from outlying regions, it is more likely the 5,000 refugees represented a mixture of Catholics and non-Catholics in search of security and food, and a haven to escape the conflict. Nonetheless, a large number would have been Catholics and their arrival led to a demographic reorganisation in the region. The Admiralty permitted refugees to take up residence in abandoned houses and, in a sign of future distortions – sometimes unfavourable – Lefèbvre recorded the disbursement of 576 francs to purchase fields for Catholics settling around the town.\(^96\)

Writing in 1866 as the vicariate’s recently appointed apostolic vicar (Lefèbvre had retired in late 1864), Mgr. Miche provided a detailed account of the fluid setting in which Vietnamese living around Saigon experienced in the mid-1860s.

\(^95\) Lefèbvre, AMEP 755, 16/03/1860, p.153.
\(^96\) Ibid.
When they [the French] arrived here [in late 1859], fear created a void [of people] around them. The whole population took flight [from Saigon]. But because it was necessary to have a well-stocked market – otherwise officers and soldiers would be reduced to rations – Christians were attracted to return little by little where they were distributed land and established themselves. Vexed, persecuted, tracked down everywhere by the Annamite army... a large number took refuge around the French in order to escape the iron and fire of the enemy. Since then they have formed 8 to 10 new chrétiennetés of considerable [size] near Saigon, at Biên Hòa, Mỹ Tho and Bà Rịa.... Today, now that peace reigns everywhere and there is no longer any need for these Christians, they take and resell the land that was initially given them, under the pretext that they do not have the title deeds to attest that they are [the true] proprietors. Too poor to mount competition against European or Chinese businessmen, they are forced to demolish their houses without any indemnity and pitch their tents elsewhere.97

These areas, Biên Hòa, Mỹ Tho and Bà Rịa, remained and grew as centres of Catholic settlement throughout the nineteenth century. What Miche’s description demonstrates is that while colonial policies manipulated and disadvantaged all sections of local society regardless of religious affiliation, the period nonetheless saw the massing of Catholics into specific areas.

Adding to this demographic shift in the population base surrounding Saigon, missionaries in mid to late 1861 proudly announced slight increases in conversions. For example, Puginier claimed in August that he had overseen the tuition of 100 catechumens, whom he had baptised, and was now in the process of catechising a further group. The large majority of them, he wrote, came from a “completely pagan village” in which the “three grand chiefs” had recently converted. He expected the whole community of 700 to convert shortly after.98 However, by 1874, the Catholic population of French Cochinchna had only grown to over forty thousand.99 The rise in conversions over this period was far from spectacular, and demonstrates that colonial rule did not deliver the expected Catholicisation of the region as hoped for by some missionaries. However, it did not pre-empt the rise of opportunity for Catholics. More specifically, it set in place a widespread social perception of an association between membership of the Church and social and political mobility within the colonial regime.

97 Miche, AMEP 755, 24/01/1866, no.527.
French rule certainly provided new and different opportunities, and for the first time Catholics enjoyed a considerable advantage in asserting their religious and political needs. Paulus Thu, a local priest, provides an example of how opportunities led to significant readjustments in local power relations. From one of the MEP’s Tonkin vicariates – his exact origins are unclear – Thu arrived in the Cochinchina mission shortly after the invasion with a number of other local clergy and missionaries fleeing the court reprisals throughout the kingdom. Full biographic details are lacking on this young priest, but he himself noted that before travelling to Cochinchina he had been in Hong Kong. It is here that he may have studied French.\footnote{Paul Thu, \textit{AMEP} 755, 25/04/1861, no.197.} Arriving in Saigon in early 1861, he was immediately put to work as an interpreter with the advancing French forces. Over the following year, Thu travelled widely throughout Biên Hòa and Đynthia Từng accompanying the advancing Franco-Spanish forces. Thus in one of his earliest letters, from March 1861, available in the Cochinchina Vicariate archive, Thu wrote to his confreres in Saigon of conditions at the fort of Chí Hòa\footnote{Thu wrote “Thị Hòa”.} northwest of Saigon shortly after the great battle there in February.\footnote{For a description of the battle see Nguyễn Thị Thanh, “The French Conquest of Cochinchina, 1858-1862”, Cornell University PhD Dissertation, 1992, pp.283-88.} A month after the end of conflict he reported on a variety of strategic and political matters: like widespread cases of Cambodians attacking and pillaging Vietnamese villages in Tây Ninh prefecture on the border, or that cholera and colic had started to cut a swath through the Franco-Spanish garrison.\footnote{Paul Thu, \textit{AMEP} 755, 25/03/1861, no. 194.} Under the sponsorship of the Admiralty Thu was instrumental in the establishment of a French school for interpreters, where he also taught briefly in early 1862.\footnote{Paul Thu, \textit{AMEP} 755, 28/01/1862, no. 240.}

It is difficult to estimate accurately how many such priests or lay Catholics, fled from other regions of Vietnam during this period, but the arrival of comparatively large groups of refugees does not appear an unlikely possibility. More immediately, his story highlights the opportunities available to young men, principally priests, who had travelled abroad, either to Penang, Macao or Hong Kong, had studied French, and had experienced a western education. As noted by Patrick Tuck, in the early years of the

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colonial regime, many priests, in whom the mission had invested so much effort to train, flocked instead to French service as linguists, teachers and interpreters.\(^{105}\)

Access to education presented the first among a number of opportunities for locals to participate in the new regime and, as Puginier indicated, it was one which benefited those living within Saigon town. In this regard he noted that: “All those from Saigon are received gratis, those from the interior are also admitted on paying funds, above all the children of village heads, Christians or pagans”.\(^{106}\) The outlying countryside was of course not exempt to change in political and social structures. Military advances into the provinces were inevitably followed by change in authority, as Thu described after French successes around Mỹ Thọ and in Định Tường province. After the fall of Cái Bè fort in October, French officers headed the area and were seconded by a local dignitary who had, only months before, led rebels in attacks on neighbouring chrétientés. Local Catholics, having had their livestock confiscated and houses destroyed, fled to Mỹ Thọ town or Saigon.\(^{107}\) As a former rebel, the official had neither the “confidence of Christians or pagans”, Thu reported.\(^{108}\)

The emerging political setting under French rule not only led to a complete reconfiguration of power relations in society it also inflamed and broadened antagonisms. A complaint lodged in May 1863 by Commandant Brière de l’Île, the chief administrator of Tây Ninh at the western reaches of French Cochin China, throws into sharp relief a number of issues in Catholic and non-Catholic relations. De l’Île reported a minor abuse of authority by the Catholic district magistrate (huy ên) of Bình Long\(^{109}\), Trần Văn Ca.\(^{110}\) Taking advantage of the new political situation, and perhaps out to impress his French masters Ca had ordered canton officials and village heads under his jurisdiction to attend a religious ceremony at his official residence. Sympathising with the magistrate’s intentions, De l’Île nevertheless admonished him for using his position with “imprudence”.

\(^{105}\) Tuck, French Catholic Missionaries and the Politics of Imperialism in Vietnam, 1857-1914, p.81-82. See also Barrou, AMEP 755, 3/03/1860, no.151.


\(^{107}\) Paul Thu, AMEP 755, 20/10/1861, no.217.

\(^{108}\) Ibid.

\(^{109}\) Bình Long district was roughly situated between Saigon and Tây Ninh town and was bordered by the Saigon River to the East and the Vâm Cô to the West, see Philippe Langlet and Quach Thanh Tâm, Atlas Historique des six provinces du sud du Vietnam du milieu du XIXe au début du Xxe siècle (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2001), p.23.

\(^{110}\) Commandant Brière de l’Île, AMEP 755, 13/05/1863, no.314.
The End of Pre-Colonial Catholicism in Cochinchina

In effect, he [Ca] used his authority to oblige pagans to come and attend a religious ceremony in a residence which is intended not for the celebration of Mass, but for undertaking the administration of the people and to give them justice....Would the Huyen (magistrate) be pleased if he learnt of pagan mandarins forcing mayors (village heads) and Christian Tongs (canton chiefs) to attend ceremonies to the Boudah?\footnote{Ibid.}

In sharp contrast to the previous decades’ repression of Catholics, when Huê sought to impose exactly this sort of observance on unwilling Catholics, this remarkable example of what De l’Île considered institutional abuse characterised the reversal of relations in society. Unfortunately it is unclear whether Trần Văn Ca had only recently been appointed as magistrate and if he had been a Catholic prior to colonisation or was a recent convert. Yet the official rebuke was not directed solely at him. Addressing the intended audience oddly in the third person, the letter appears to have been sent to Lefèvre rather than directly to Ca. It is clearly a veiled admonition of the mission.

The Commandant would like it to be understood that the Huyen Ca is within himself two people, 1\textsuperscript{st} a Christian who strives by prayer to enter Heaven, 2\textsuperscript{nd} the Huyen who strives in this world to administer the people following the rules of justice and in the Civilising way marked for him by the high administration of the French. Missionaries on the contrary have only a single matter to tend to, to reach Heaven while making the truth of Christianity known to pagans. But they only employ persuasion, because Christ forbids violence.

That De l’Île should refer to mission activities in his commentary on Ca’s conflict of interest strongly suggests his concern for the authority and personal influence held by missionaries among not only Catholics but also low-level officials throughout the region. The commandant rightfully observed that Ca’s behaviour endangered social cohesion. But at stake in this case is not specifically the conflict of religious practices.

In sharp contrast to pre-colonial Vietnamese conceptions of political behaviour, the increasingly secular worldview of the post-Revolutionary French state – even under Napoleon III – conceived a distinct separation between a person’s religious beliefs and their duties and rights as a citizen. While a French citizen owed allegiance to the emperor, his or her religious beliefs theoretically did not betray political affiliation. This feature of colonial rule is brought into sharp focus by Brière de l’Île’s admonition of
Trần Văn Ca in 1863. The imposition of this model of social order led to unusual and unexpected distortions in a society unfamiliar with such categorical and ideological distinctions. From the mid-1860s colonial distinctions between Catholics and non-Catholics made the difference more concrete. Thus, instead of engendering neutrality, colonial rule precipitated the essentialisation of political identities with Catholics as a distinct group.

Indicative of the emergence of tensions between the colonial state and the Catholic mission, this example also draws our attention to the substantial expansion of MEP influence in Cochinina. As the French consolidated their position in Saigon in 1860 to 1862 missionaries throughout the kingdom fled to this safe-haven to escape from the recriminations occurring elsewhere. In 1862, Lefèbvre reported the presence of twelve missionaries in the vicariate, up from only four in 1858. Most of these, however, were missionaries who had fled the violence raging in other parts of Vietnam at the time. This figure rose to twenty-three in 1865, and doubled again by the mid-1870s. Indeed, between 1861 and 1866 some seventeen missionaries arrived in the mission, the single largest wave in the mission’s history. In sharp contrast, the local clergy returned to the pre-invasion level of over twenty in 1866 to remain equal with foreign clergy numbers at over forty for the rest of the century. The rise of foreign clergy signified nothing less than an attempt to saturate the region – initially the three provinces ceded at the 1862 treaty – with mission influence. In doing so, the mass of arrivals effectively and emphatically reversed the indigenisation of Church responsibilities initiated by Cuenot and Lefèbvre.

VII. Conclusion
The advent of French rule in Cochinina not only ended Nguyễn rule in the Six Provinces by 1867, it precipitated a profound reconfiguration of social relations at the local level throughout the kingdom. Facing the full brunt of this change, Catholic society was itself transformed by the upheaval. For the previous three decades, the

113 See APF XXXVIII (1866), p.279.
114 See the biographic details listed under the MEP archive website under the “recherché” link, www.archivmep.org.fr.
prevailing pattern of community relations between Catholics and officials, and Catholics and mainstream neighbours had been one of negotiation and accommodation. Except for the periods following the French naval incursions at Đà Nẵng (in 1847 and 1856), Catholic communities largely lived in relative security, just beyond the threat of central bureaucratic control. The invasion ended such compromise. The Franco-Spanish assault unleashed a wave of panic throughout the bureaucracy. Acting on orders to contain and imprison Catholics, for the first time since the beginning of the proscription in 1833 officials implemented anti-Catholic measures to their full extent, rounding up whole chrétientés in some provinces, and in the end executing several thousands. But it is crucial to emphasise that these measures were not carried out until the political situation reached its nadir with the French opening a second invasion front in Saigon, in late 1859.

In the aftermath of the French consolidation around Saigon, the distortions caused by the reconfiguration of power in the far south, not to mention the demographic and cultural dislocation that accompanied it, moulded social structures and shaped new attitudes among Catholics and non-Catholics. From 1860, Catholics settled in increasing numbers in a ring around the towns, especially in the prominent centres of Mỹ Tho, Biên Hòa and Bà Rịa. Although Catholics were among the first to enjoy the protection and benefits of colonial regime, the privileges came at a heavy cost. While many French-trained priests enjoyed prominence as translators, Catholic communities in outlying areas suffered from a dramatic deterioration in social relations with their non-Catholic neighbours. Now identified with the new regime, their former flexible relations and compromises with their mainstream neighbours became increasingly rigid and distant.
Conclusion

In the three decades preceding the invasion fundamental shifts altered not only state-society relations but also community ties between Catholics and non-Catholics. In order to provide a nuanced picture of this period, this thesis has explored Catholic experiences against the background of two major developments: the politically centralising and culturally homogenising reforms implemented under the court of Minh Mạng from the 1820s; and, in response to the anti-Catholic measures of the late 1830s, the transformation of the mission organisation from 1841. But rather than concentrate on the formal impact of these reform initiatives, my study has traced their unpredictable and unexpected consequences, results that I believe had the most enduring and profound impact on society.

Scholarship has long overlooked the significance of Catholicism and social change at the local level. Instead, when explaining the devastating events which swept the kingdom at the advent of colonial rule, studies have generally concentrated on divisions between Catholics and non-Catholics as a critical feature of the period. Described as a major flashpoint in the conflict, hostile relations have been simplistically portrayed as timeless and based on fundamental cultural differences. This has led to depictions of the main tragedies of the period as inevitable. An exploration of social change in the 1830s to 1850s has revealed a far different picture.

Drawing on mission correspondence, translated Nguyễn documents and the dynastic chronicles, this thesis has sought to balance a view of Catholic and non-Catholic experiences, in regard to both communities and individuals. In my consideration of a range of encounters between local officials, peasants, priests, missionaries and senior mandarins, one feature shines through prominently in many accounts, that despite enmity at the highest levels of government, in the wider society dialogue and human empathy could define interactions just as much as opportunism or
Conclusion

hostility. In fact, it took the widespread anxiety generated by repeated French naval bombardments of Vietnamese territory in 1847 and 1856, followed by the upheavals caused by French invasion, to fuel a deep distrust of Catholics at the local level that finally ended the grassroots accommodation that had survived decades of official Nguyên persecution.

I. Continuity and Change

In the conclusion of his study of southern Vietnam under Minh Mạng, Choi Byung Wook raises an interesting link between the long-term impact of reform policies from the Minh Mạng reign, including bureaucratic centralisation and cultural homogenisation, and the emergence of a generation of loyalist southern Confucian scholars and landlords in the 1860s. Born in the late 1820s and educated in the 1830s and 1840s this group, Choi observed, formed the backbone of the anti-French resistance throughout the 1860s and 1870s. The pragmatic “state-building” impetus of the reign, apparent through the enticement of a generation into Confucian education and the bureaucracy, had been a success. Apart from shaping attitudes and moulding loyalties, the policies had ensured the rise of an elite community in the far south, mindful of local networks but ultimately focused on Huế’s rule.

Choi’s link draws our attention to other momentous continuities stretching back to the Minh Mạng era, among which this thesis has focused on Catholic experiences. For while a slice of southern society enjoyed long term benefits from the Minh Mạng reforms, a number of other communities, as my study has shown, were inevitably left out. Vietnamese Catholics in particular suffered systemic discrimination and disadvantage. Their experiences of centralisation reform and cultural homogenisation were, in contrast to the bulk of mainstream society, traumatic. As Choi’s study has recognised, it is crucial to acknowledge how greatly the previous decades’ experiences informed change and the reconfiguration of political loyalties at the advent of the colonial era.

Nguyễn antipathy towards Catholicism first arose during the Minh Mạng reign in the context of sweeping reforms to the bureaucratic structure of rule and

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2 Ibid.
Conclusion

reorganisation of the kingdom's ritual sites. Yet prior to colonisation Catholics generally conceived their identity according to traditional structures: observance of the political primacy of the dynasty and traditional notions of personal cultivation and education. As we saw with the two soldiers Phạm Viết Huy and Bùi Đức Thế in their petition to Minh Mạng in 1839, Catholics did not see their adherence to a proscribed religion as grounds for conflict with their loyalty to the structure of authority. The conflict between Catholic and court views of loyalty and obedience did not arise from a contest of political allegiances. Although the violence of several successive Nguyễn kings aroused bitter resentment, Catholics continued to pay taxes and submitted to corvee and military obligations. Indeed, within the bureaucracy the number of officials who quietly identified themselves as Christian may have been at least proportional to the size of the general Church population.

Far from singling out all Catholics for punishment, the court under Minh Mạng identified the mission as the principal threat. Nguyễn rule projected a vision of universal primacy, and from the 1810s it sought incrementally to realise this, through temple construction, bureaucratic reform and cultural homogenisation, all of which affected ever-lower levels of society. Directly challenging this impetus, the Catholic mission promoted its own universality. By requiring adherents to deny the spiritual primacy of the Nguyễn dynasty it undermined a core feature of Huế rule. In short, it was the inextricable religious and ritual dimension of political activity within the kingdom that first aroused tensions.

From the early 1830s, the issue of anti-Catholic edicts, punitive searches and violent reprisals slowly caused grave instability within society. Crucially, court policies had unpredictable consequences. Huế's aim to bend all religious communities to a central hierarchy elicited immediate resistance, not simply among Catholics, but also among low-level officials and neighbouring non-Catholics. The most noticeable response came in the form of a culture of bribery and extortion in which chrétientés evaded compliance with court proscription and neutralised the threat of violence by negotiating with officials and neighbours. Bribery and extortion enabled a level of stability in local-level relations, but it also entrenched compromise leaving Catholics open to exploitation and officials susceptible to punishment. Far from being pushed to

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3 See Chapter 3.
the very margins of society, Catholic communities in the south continued to live in mainstream villages throughout the 1840s and 1850s. In fact, one of my key findings has been to highlight the persistence of negotiation between chrétientés and medium and low-level officials.

Demonised by Huế and targeted for victimisation at key points, more often than not negotiation characterised the experiences of southern Catholics. Thus, the only time court efforts succeeded in attempts to destroy the mission and force Catholics to recant was at times of extreme downward pressure within the bureaucracy, for example in 1838-39, or after the flashpoint of external military confrontation, notably in 1847 after Lapierre, in 1856 after Montigny, and again in 1859. In the end it was the French invasion that ended local compromises between Catholics and officials. The shift in power-relations and the sheer devastation visited on the region led to a fundamental and irreversible reconfiguration of southern society.

More immediately, the distortions caused by Nguyể̄n anti-Catholicism from the 1830s inspired reform and adjustments within the mission. From the late 1830s, and especially in the 1840s, increased levels of funding from France enabled the apostolic vicars, such as Cuenot and Lefèvbre, to respond to punitive court measures and alter the imbalance against Catholics. Following the Gò Thị Synod of 1841, they deployed funds to remove neophytes and converts from compromising situations and help them resettle among all-Catholic communities. However, in the short term mission funding fuelled the expanding culture of bribery and extortion. Such use of mission funds, to help chrétientés neutralise the threat of violence and allow missionaries to evade capture, did not go unnoticed by the court. By the end of the 1830s and throughout the 1840s, mission efforts were countered by increasingly larger rewards and inducements for communities and officials to comply with official policy.

But the most wide-reaching impact came through the precipitous expansion of mission education. Not only did Mgrs. Cuenot and Lefèvbre increase seminarian numbers within East and West Cochinchina, they broadened the scope of activities and experiences by encouraging the use of quốc ngữ. Concurrently, the dispatch of young seminarians to Penang in large numbers from the early 1840s not only led to the spectacular growth of the clergy, it exposed larger numbers of Catholics to new experiences in education and intellectual interaction, as a result contributing to the
flowering of Catholic literature. These experiences undoubtedly left an indelible impression on the men involved, and in turn on the chrétientés they returned to serve. Far from simply training and grooming a generation of compliant young priests loyal to the mission, this new education gave rise to men equipped with specialist skills that came into immediate demand in the colonial regime after 1858.

While Huế’s anti-Catholic policy from the early 1830s had a severe impact on communities, mission organisational adjustment enabled the Cochinchina vicariate to bounce back from the Minh Mạng repression. Yet in both cases it was often the unexpected and unintended consequences of reforms ordered at the highest level, whether at the Huế court or within the vicariate, that had the most critical impact on communities and individuals. This feature of the late-precolonial landscape is brought into sharp focus by the decisions and experiences of young Catholics at the advent of colonial rule.

II. Communities and Individuals

In the aftermath of the French assault in Saigon, new systems of authority took root, new demographic patterns reshaped human settlement and new opportunities for advancement altered the regional political landscape. Many Catholics obviously benefited from these new arrangements. Among them were those described by Milton Osborne as the early collaborateurs: including, the military officer Trần Bá Lộc, the linguist and administrator Paulus Huỳnh Tĩnh Cua, and Petrus Trường Vĩnh Kỳ, a professor and advisor. Osborne depicts such figures as opportunists and the chief beneficiaries of the new regime. In stigmatising them as traitors, however, he also focuses on conversion to Catholicism as the determinant of their political interests. But not all at this time claimed benefit through their ties with the mission and not all Catholics rallied to the French.

In his description of the 1862 meeting between the Nguyễn envoys and French representatives to negotiate a treaty, Osborne recounts Phan Thanh Giản’s disgust at the sight of several Vietnamese accompanying the French. His anger subsided, however, after it was revealed they were Christians; to Phan Thanh Giản they had already “passed

outside the pale”. Unnoticed by Osborne was the presence at this thorny meeting of Đặng Đức Tuân, a Bình Định priest who had remained loyal to the Nguyễn. Harking from an illustrious family of Nguyễn court ministers and scholars, Tuân was also a Penang college graduate who had served the mission through the dark years of the 1850s and enjoyed a close friendship with Mgr. Cuenot. While a staunch Catholic, Tuân was also a thoroughgoing Confucian scholar. Despite his support for Huế until his death in 1874, the intellectual character of his literature reveals an uncompromising loyalty to both Confucian learning and Catholic doctrine. So while large sections of non-Catholic society undoubtedly perceived Catholics in terms of their association with the mission, and through it the French, we need to be careful not to view their religious identification as irreducible markers of political identity.

As Robert Hefner has suggested, religious affiliation often entails a negotiation of moral beliefs with practical needs according to the limitations of the contemporary setting. Identification with Catholicism alone did not determine a believer’s moral or political convictions in nineteenth-century Vietnam, or today. Other large forces of social change and upheaval play a formative role in decisions taken and individual negotiations of what is moral and practical. Indeed, as Hefner explains in his discussion of the dynamics of religious conversion, the process of self-identification is not “innate or wholly socially determined but develops from ongoing and deeply contingent social-psychological interactions.” For Catholics, as with the rest of Vietnamese society and the Nguyễn mandarinate, the French invasion was a world-changing event and as such it elicited a variety of responses. Instead of focusing on the personal advantages and benefits afforded by colonial rule, our understanding of the local involvement in the regime needs to account for the socio-cultural continuities from the pre-colonial era. In order to make sense of these responses we need to acknowledge the sometimes less than obvious changes in social relations in the previous decades.

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5 Ibid., p.68
8 Ibid.
Conclusion

I propose to end by illustrating this point by focusing on the personal experiences of Trần Bá Lộc, one of the most successful military officials in the early French regime. His story can help us throw into relief the contours of continuity and change in Catholic experiences from the 1830s into the colonial era. While not suggesting Trần Bá Lộc’s life was representative of all Catholics for this period, his life-choices and experiences were characteristic of the challenges faced by many others of his generation. The following account is taken from a biography written by a close colleague, George Dürrrwell, shortly after Trần Bá Lộc’s death, in October 1899. Despite several inaccuracies in minor details – which I highlight – this narrative offers invaluable insights into one of the most decorated Catholics within the colonial administration.

A native of Đâu Nước chrétienté on Cù Lao Giêng island, Lộc was born in 1839 into a Catholic family with a distinguished heritage. While he achieved fame only from the 1860s, first as a colonial district official and later as a decorated military campaigner during the 1880s, his story begins with his father, a migrant from the central region. Trần Bá Phước, his father, left his home village in Quảng Bình for Gia Định apparently after a family dispute in 1826. Educated and a holder of the lesser regional tú tài degree, Bá Phước found no difficulty in finding employment as a teacher for the children of an official in Vĩnh Long. After meeting Nguyễn Văn Thắng, a deputy commander (phó quan cơ) in 1829, Bá Phước moved to Đâu Nước to become the teacher of his children. Over the years the relationship strengthened, with Văn Thắng offering Bá Phước his daughter, Nguyễn Thị Öz, in marriage. In early 1831, around the time Joseph Marchand made his first pastoral visit up the Mekong, from Mặc Bắc to Phnom Penh, the two married in the chrétienté Church, a month after Phước’s baptism in the neighbouring chrétienté of Chà Và.

Phước’s baptism shortly before his marriage in 1831 is highly significant, and elicits two pertinent observations. Trần Bá Phước was invited to live in Đâu Nước not because he was out of luck, an itinerant, or desperate for help, nor did he necessarily seek membership to this community purely for personal advantage. He was a valued person with a talent and skill worthy of respect. His conversion was probably at the request of Nguyễn Văn Thắng who himself was probably a neophyte. The choice to convert may not have been completely voluntary, but given Phước’s status as a teacher
and the open-armed welcome he received by Đậu Nước chrétienté, it appears patently clear that his entering the religion was synonymous with his assuming a place, a status and an identity, within this community. In short, in the context of his migration south, Phước’s conversion to Catholicism symbolised nothing less than his localisation in this sparsely settled frontier world.

Trần Bá Lộc, the eldest of three sons, was born in 1839 at the height of the Minh Mang repression. Dürrwell recounts that he was raised according to a laborious regimen of study and family chores. He also notes that Lộc distinguished himself from a young age as having an “energetic spirit”. It was in these formative years, the 1840s and early 1850s, that Lộc studied within the mission. He not only lived in a village frequented regularly by priests and probably also French missionaries, but for a year, according to Dürrwell, Lộc studied at the secret mission college, then at Cái Nhurr (Cái Mon) under the direction of Borelle. Although little is known of his life in the 1840s and early 1850s, we can safely assume that Lộc’s family faced many of the same challenges and anxieties of Catholics in other areas of the kingdom.

But from the mid-1850s, when Lộc was a teenager, the upheavals caused by French incursions and finally invasion led to a dramatic turn in the family’s fortunes. In January 1859, as tolerance for Catholics among low-level officials evaporated, Châu Đốc’s prefect ordered a punitive search of Đậu Nước chrétienté in the hope of capturing Pernot, who had been hiding in the village for several years. In the ensuing attack, the militia arrested some thirty-seven Catholics, notably the village head and chief catechist Emmanuel Phùng (Lộc’s godfather), several of his brothers, and Father Pierre Quí. Among the captives was Lộc’s father, Trần Bá Phước. In his account of the attack, Pernot notes in passing the defiance of a “catechist who has been a Christian only since his marriage”, who may possibly even have been Phước. In any case, Lộc’s father refused to recant and appears to have been among the nine tattooed on the face and exiled to Binh Dinh. He was not released until the end of 1862.

10 Dürrwell’s narrative at this point errs in recounting the dates of events (Ibid., pp.35-36). He notes that the attack on the village occurred around when Lộc was sixteen, 1856. The raid which led to the capture of Emmanuel Phùng, as described in detail by Pernot, took place in January 1859, Pernot, AMEP 755, 29/01/1859, no. 128. See also, Borelle, AMEP 755, no.181, (written in 1860).
11 Pernot, AMEP 755, 29/01/1859, no. 128.
Conclusion

After experiencing the trauma of his father’s arrest and exile, we can only imagine the emotions that twenty-year-old Lộc felt. One of them was surely deep resentment at the humiliating arrest, branding, and exile of his father, a degree holder and respected community leader. Adding to his difficulties, as the eldest son the protection of his natal family now fell squarely on the newly married Lộc. With his own family and future to consider and like many other southern Catholic families and chrétientés at the time, Lộc sought the protection of the French encampment at Mỹ Thọ.

Lộc joined the newly raised French-controlled militia in which, according to Dürrwell, he soon reached the rank of a sergeant (đôi) after several battles against withdrawing Nguyễn forces. From the late 1860s he distinguished himself as a capable administrator and military commander. Without detailing here his longer career, Lộc enjoyed an almost unmatched prosperity after his fortuitous promotion to district official of Cái Bè, near Mỹ Thọ, in 1865. From the late 1860s he distinguished himself as a capable administrator and military commander. Later the brutality of his campaigns against anti-colonial resistance in Phú Yên and Binh Định provinces, the scene of Catholic massacres during the abortive Cần Vương anti-French uprising in late 1885, would bring him serious criticism in some quarters on his return to Saigon in early 1886 along with the honorary – but farcical – title of “Tổng Đốc de Thuận-Khánh”, Governor-general of Binh Thuận and Khánh Hòa.

On a number of levels Lộc epitomises his generation’s experiences of social and political upheaval in the decades preceding colonisation, and it is in this context that we need to view the motivations of such men who rallied to the French. Rather than simply seeking the dubious advantages of collaboration when faced with an overwhelmingly superior military force, other factors require comment. The hot-blooded pursuit of vengeance for injustices and the fear of greater anti-Catholic recriminations should the French invasion have failed were undoubtedly two factors motivating Lộc and many others in 1859. Such experiences certainly do not excuse Lộc’s brutality in Binh Định – the site of his father’s exile – two decades later, although they go a long way towards explaining it. But by the same token, the almost genocidal anti-Catholic violence in Nam Định, Quảng Trị and Binh Định in the 1880s cannot be seen as absolving the horrors caused by the early French regime. Rather, personal and community motivations

13 Ibid., p.49.
driving the mass-violence of this period stand as evidence of the rapid deterioration in Catholic and non-Catholic relations caused by the chaotic changes in loyalties and relations from the advent of colonisation.

All the same, Lộc’s immediate support for the French was not emulated uniformly throughout Catholic society. Not all Catholics sought personal advantage, and not all who sought opportunities with the French were Catholic. At the very least, such experiences throw light onto the range of personal motivations and responses to the precipitous events of his generation: the struggle for compromise in a hostile setting, the search for opportunity and self-fulfilment despite political limitations, and the desperate effort to ensure family security and prosperity.

III.

In early nineteenth-century Cochinchina, Catholics came from all walks of life, followed commonly trod paths of advance, and adhered to traditional social structures. Far from representing an externally imposed system, the Vietnamese Catholic Church combined foreign mission interests with local social structures. The mission promoted an ideology which proclaimed a universal truth to the exclusion of others, and operated through a well organised, internationally connected structure. It offered a religion accessible to all, even the most lowly, and its administrative organisation was highly adaptable to change owing to its interregional connections and, from the 1830s, its swelling resources. Although a religion centred on Rome, it was the localisation of Catholicism in the Vietnamese village setting which posed the greatest challenge to Nguyễn statehood.

For much of the three to four decades preceding colonisation, Vietnamese Catholics in the far south represented a relatively well-assimilated community. Indeed, as I have demonstrated, compromise and accommodation, between Catholics and non-Catholics, lay leaders and local officials, was more often than not the norm in grassroots community relations. The French invasion and the advent of colonial rule initiated the devastating social upheaval which created and later sharpened political divisions within society. However these divisions need to viewed in the context of longer unfolding trends in grassroots society. The court’s concerted efforts from the 1830s to strengthen central rule and, concurrently, the mission’s reforms to indigenise its local structures in response to the repression both influenced long-term trends. New social and political
identities emerged as a consequence, foreshadowing wider shifts in community relations in the south. The year 1863 may have heralded the last days of Vietnamese political autonomy in Cochinchina and the slow demise of many long-entrenched community ways. Yet the changes which had plunged southern society into so much turmoil symbolised only a harbinger of some less than obvious, but nonetheless profound, transformations for the local world.
Bibliography

I. Key Abbreviations

AMEP  Archives des Missions Étrangères de Paris
APF   Annales de la Propagation de la Foi
DNTL  Đại Nam Thục Lục
HDSL  Khâm Định Đại Nam Hội Diên Sự Lệ
LT    Đại Nam Liệt Truyện
MMCY  Minh Mệnh Chính Yêu

II. French Archival Volumes

    ____ 748, “Cochinchine: 1831-1840”, by page number.
    ____ 1095, “Vietnam Catechisme Impose Par Mgr Pigneaux 1774”.
    ____ 1259, “Lettres de Venard et Delamotte”, by date.
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