

A History of Vietnamese Christianity

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A History of Vietnamese Christianity

Encounters and Emerging Horizons

Edited by

Anh Q. Tran, SJ
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Foreword

Peter C. Phan

The book I am honored to present is truly a first of its kind. Since the end of the so-called Vietnam War in 1975, most Western works on Vietnam have dealt mainly with its history, politics, economics, wars, and non-Christian religions. There are of course monographs on aspects of Vietnamese Christianity but no comprehensive treatment of its history from its beginnings in the first half of the seventeenth century to today. *A History of Vietnamese Christianity* offers exactly what the title announces: a chronological survey of the main periods, trends, movements, events, and actors in the four-hundred-year history of Christianity in Vietnam.

Such a comprehensive introduction to Vietnamese Christianity by itself is already a landmark in historical scholarship, but some of its features make it even more noteworthy. First, it has successfully corrected the widespread but inaccurate impression that Vietnamese Christianity, especially the Catholic Church, is the creation of French missionaries. Of course, the preponderant presence since the second half of the nineteenth century of the members of the Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP), the large number of French bishops, the widespread activities of many French religious orders, both male and female, in education (given mostly in French!) and healthcare, and especially the financial support of the French colonial government for the church's missions might have lent credence to this allegation and the accusation that the Vietnamese Catholic Church were in cahoots with French colonialism, and later the Vietnamese Protestant Churches with American imperialism.

The book, however, has shown that from its beginnings, the Vietnamese Catholic Church was served by mostly Iberian Jesuits and Dominicans, and I would add, Franciscans, and Discalced Augustinians, not counting the French missionaries of the Paris Foreign Missions Society (aforementioned MEP) and others. Indeed, the hostilities among foreign missionaries did not stem from their different nationalities but from the two separate ecclesiastical systems they worked under, the *padroado/patronato real* under Portugal and Spain and the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (*Propaganda Fide*), founded in 1622.

Catholicism in northern Vietnam inherited from Portuguese and Spanish missionaries the Iberian spirituality, with an emphasis on devotion to Mary and the saints and numerous practices of popular religiosity such as the recital of the rosary, the Passion Play during the Holy Week, and novenas, whereas

Catholicism in southern Vietnam, mostly under the oversight of the MEP, was more influenced by the French school of spirituality propounded by Pierre de Bérulle, Jean Eudes, Jean-Jacques Ollier, Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort, and Jean-Baptiste de la Salle (The latter's disciples, Les Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes, ran three prestigious *lycées*, Puginier in Hanoi, Pellerin in Hue, and Taberd in Saigon).

The book's second notable feature is that its contributors include both Vietnamese and foreign scholars, and especially, roughly one-third are female authors. The presence of female scholars, six of whom are Vietnamese, bodes well for the field that has been hitherto dominated by men and for highlighting the role, so far largely ignored or even suppressed, of women, especially lay, in Vietnamese Christianity. For instance, when the history of Vietnamese Catholicism from 1975 to 2000 is written, it will become clear that the church survived only thanks to the under-the-radar and unsung work of Christian women who faithfully preserved and nurtured the faith of nearly a generation of believers as ordained and male church leadership was effectively neutralized by the communist government and confined to strictly church functions.

The third significant contribution of the book is its enlargement of the treatment of Vietnamese Christianity to include the work of Protestants and Evangelicals. Because their number is relatively small and especially because, unlike Catholics, they do not have the backing of a powerful international organization such as the Vatican, their relationship with the government has always been tenuous. They tend to be house churches and do not enjoy the benefits of registered churches. This makes their witness to the Christian faith all the more credible and powerful.

The fourth praiseworthy feature is the book's treatment of the Vietnamese Christian diaspora in the United States and elsewhere. Most histories of Vietnamese Christianity give scant notice to the Vietnamese Christian diaspora, despite its huge contributions to the life of the local Christian communities, both Catholic and Evangelical.

Of course, other achievements of Vietnamese Christianity also deserve close study. To mention just a few: its invention of the Romanized script, now accepted as the national script; its educational system at all levels; its health-care and social services networks; its contributions to national literature, especially in poetry and novels; its development of Viet philosophy and theology; its church music and songs; and art and architecture.

We are grateful to the editors and the contributors for providing us with this informative reference work. A *History of Vietnamese Christianity* will be an indispensable resource for both advanced scholars and beginning students of Christianity in Vietnam.

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