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The Relationship between the State and the Church in Vietnam through the History of the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris

Odnos med državo in Cerkvijo v Vietnamu skozi zgodovino Družbe zunanjih misijonov (Pariz)

Abstract: Religion and the Catholic Church have played an important role in Vietnamese history. The article examines the development of the Catholic Church in Vietnam, from the 17th Century to the 20th Century, based on reports published by the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris (M.E.P.) who contributed to the evangelization of many Asian countries. In this contribution, we will highlight the work and the development of the M.E.P through their reports. We will also focus on the relationship between the states who played a specific role in the history of the Catholic Church in Vietnam, from the creation of the M.E.P. until the period of post-colonization, with specific reference to the attitude of different states throughout the history of Vietnam. The survey of the activities of Catholics in Vietnam suggests that French missionaries were well organized and proactive throughout the centuries, and that the adoption of Christianity in Vietnam was achieved through cooperation between the M.E.P and the Vietnamese population.

Keywords: Church history, Catholic Church, Vietnam, French Indochina, French missionaries

Povzetek: Religija in katoliška Cerkev sta igrali pomembno vlogo v zgodovini Vietnama. Članek obravnava razvoj katoliške Cerkve v Vietnamu, od 17. do 20. stoletja, na podlagi poročil, ki jih je objavila pariška Družba zunanjih misijonov (v francoščini M.E.P.). Družba je prispevala k evangelizaciji mnogih azijskih držav. Najprej bomo predstavili delo in razvoj Družbe M.E.P. skozi njena poročila. Osredotočili se bomo tudi na odnose z državo, od ustanovitve Družbe M.E.P., ki je odigrala posebno vlogo v zgodovini katoliške Cerkve v Vietnamu, do obdobja po francoski kolonizaciji. Poudarili bomo odnos, ki so ga imele različne države skozi zgodovino Vietnama. Raziskava katoliških dejavnosti v Vietnamu kaže, da so bili francoski misijonarji skozi stoletja dobro organizirani in proaktivni ter da je bilo sprejetje krščanstva v Vietnamu doseženo s sodelovanjem med Družbo M.E.P. in vietnamsko populacijo.

Ključne besede: zgodovina Cerkve, katoliška Cerkev, Vietnam, Francoska Indokina, francoski misijonarji

1. Introduction

After more than 1,000 years of Chinese domination (179 AC–938 AD) and more than 900 years of national independence (938–1862), Vietnam was colonized by France for about 90 years (1864–1954), with the first French conquests dating from 1858. During the French colonization, the kingdom, previously founded by Emperor Gia Long who reigned from 1802 to 1820, was integrated into a geographical entity called “French Indochina”, which encompassed essentially Cambodia and Laos as well as present-day Vietnam. For administrative reasons, Vietnam (or at that time, French Indochina) was divided into three parts: Tonkin in the North, Annam in the Centre, and Cochinchina in the South. While Cochinchina was directly governed by the French authorities as a colony, Tonkin and Annam, which became French protectorates, retained a certain autonomy embodied by their emperor who then held symbolic power. Later, the abdication of national sovereignty led to a hard struggle against France. This struggle was concretized by armed uprisings throughout the kingdom. The Vietnamese resistance against the French in Vietnam began in the 1860s and continued sporadically until the 1930s. The various movements of resistance began to appear during World War II and reached a climax in September 1945. But they were repressed because they were badly organized. They lasted until the French defeat in 1954.

However, relations between France and Vietnam started long before French colonization, as early as the 17th Century with the mission of the French Jesuit father Alexandre de Rhodes. This research study outlines the development of Catholicism in Vietnam, from the 17th Century to the 20th Century, based on public reports published by the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris (in French, *Société des Missions Etrangères de Paris*; in short, M.E.P.). The study uses a qualitative historical approach to identify the religious and political evolution of the Catholic Church in Vietnam. We will highlight the work and the development of the M.E.P through their reports and we will also focus on the relationship between the states who played a specific role in the history of the Catholic Church in Vietnam, from the beginning of the M.E.P. until the period of post-colonization.

2. The development of the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris in Vietnam

Christianity surfaced in Vietnam in the third decade of the 16th Century thanks to the work of French, Spanish and Portuguese missionaries. From 1615 to 1659, the missionary work was carried out by a number of Jesuits who came to Vietnam to consolidate the Christian mission. The most famous among them was the French Jesuit, Father Alexandre de Rhodes, who was an important figure in Vietnamese history. De Rhodes arrived in Central Vietnam in 1624. His accomplishments in this country were exemplary: he succeeded in bringing about some ten thousand conversions, he opened a church in Hanoi in 1627, he set up an organi-

zation of lay catechists, etc. (Phan 2005, 85). Alexandre De Rhodes also wrote the first dictionary (*Dictionarium Annamiticum Lusitanum et Latinum*) incorporating a romanization of the modern Vietnamese language. However, he was expelled from Vietnam several times and definitively in 1645, because he conducted clandestine missionary activities. After travelling for four years, Alexandre de Rhodes arrived in Rome in 1649 and he pleaded in favour of sending bishops to Asia who would be responsible for promoting an indigenous clergy, taking care of the church faithful, and would be able to survive during times of persecution.

The creation of the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris (in French, Société des Missions Etrangères or M.E.P.; in Slovene, Družba zunanjih misijonov (Pariz) or Pariško semenišče (Marković 2016, 664)) was initiated by de Rhodes. He reported circa 1650 that there were 300,000 Catholics in the North of Vietnam, with a yearly increase of 15,000. De Rhodes obtained an agreement from the Papacy to send missionaries to Vietnam. To strengthen its presence in Vietnam, the Church also created an ecclesiastical circumscription, the vicariate, which was led by an apostolic vicar exercising exclusive jurisdiction. The vicar was placed under the direct authority of the Pope and had responsibility for founding a new Church in Vietnam. It was a delicate task because, according to the Vietnamese Imperial Historical Records (1884), there was, already in 1533, under the reign of King Le Trang Ton, an Edict that forbade the new religion (the “Da-to ta dao” or false Christian religion), which had been preached by a priest, Father Ignatius, in some villages in a province of North Vietnam (Phan 2005, 84).

Officially the M.E.P. was established in 1658 as a Roman Catholic missionary organization of secular priests and lay persons dedicated to missionary work in foreign lands. In 1659, three vicars left for three Asian regions (Tonkin, Cochinchina and Nanjing) with specific directives from Rome. These included creating an indigenous clergy and adapting to the habits and customs of the country, while avoiding interference in internal political affairs. So, the Catholic Church decided to establish itself in Vietnam from an institutional point of view with the support of the priests of the M.E.P. Several vicariates were, however, created in Vietnam by French missionaries long before French colonization. Reports for those times, kept in the Archives of the M.E.P., indicate that the Apostolic Vicariate of Tonkin was erected in 1659 and divided into the vicariates of western and eastern Tonkin. They also reported that in the period 1659-1700, the chief events of the Society in Vietnam were the foundation of the general seminary at Siam; the evangelization of Tonkin, Cochinchina, and Siam, where more than 40,000 Christians were baptized, the creation of an institute of Annamite nuns known as “Lovers of the Cross”, etc. (Lange 2005, 13–14). Besides these events, an active trade was established between Indochina and France through the missionaries’ initiative.

The French missionary priest and Bishop of Adran, Pierre Pigneau de Behaine, also played a key role in Vietnamese history towards the end of the 18th Century. He had come to southern Vietnam to proselytize. When Nguyen Anh conquered Vietnam and declared himself Emperor Gia Long, he tolerated the Catholic faith and permitted missionary activities, because he was favourable to Bishop Pigneau

de Behaine. "In 1787, under the reign of Louis XVI, a French Catholic missionary, Mgr P. Pigneau de Bédaine, signed a treaty of alliance and commerce with the Emperor Nguyen Anh between France and Cochinchina, the Treaty of Versailles" (Beigbeder 2006, 60). The M.E.P. then saw an opportunity to expand the Catholic Church's influence in Vietnam.

At the end of the 18th Century, the French Revolution of 1789 halted the growth of the M.E.P. At that time, the M.E.P reported that the missions had six bishops, a score of missionaries, assisted by 135 native priests. In various missions, there were nine seminaries with 250 students, and 300,000 Christians. Each year, the number of baptisms rose on an average of 3000 to 3500, while that of infant baptisms in *articulo mortis* was more than 100,000 (Launay 1894). Later, an M.E.P report (1802) mentioned that the Roman Catholic Church in Vietnam had 3 dioceses: the Diocese of Eastern North Vietnam (140,000 members, 41 Vietnamese priests, 4 missionary priests and 1 bishop); the Diocese of Western North Vietnam (120,000 members, 65 Vietnamese priests, 46 missionary priests and 1 bishop); and the Diocese of Central and South Vietnam: 60,000 members, 15 Vietnamese priests, 5 missionary priests and 1 bishop (Ha Noi 2004, 192). The missionary activity in the central and southern regions was mainly dominated by the French at that time.

However, restrictions on Catholicism began, and edicts regarding the interdiction of the Catholic religion were promulgated. So, at the beginning of the 19th Century, before the French colonial period, the Nguyen Dynasty was antagonistic to the development of the Catholic missions and the new religion. Indeed, the Confucianism was the religion of the state and "In a Confucian state, the emperor has absolute power, which is not acceptable to Christians. If Vietnam became more Christian, the legitimacy of the emperor and his dynasty would be challenged" (Nguyen et al. 2019, 524). Christianity was thus banned in Vietnam. Some Nguyen emperors, disliking the effects of Catholicism on their people, also attempted to nullify the activities of missionaries. Between 1825 and 1851, "the Emperor Minh Mang issued seven edicts of persecution, resulting in the execution, then the expulsion of French and Spanish missionaries, and the execution of Vietnamese Catholics" (Beigbeder 2006, 60). According to the M.E.P., main Christian persecutions were carried out very hard in particular between 1833 and 1861. Conflicts and persecutions continued in the following years against French missionaries of the M.E.P.

3. The M.E.P. during French colonization

In 1857, the rejection of Christianity was the pretext for France's military intervention and the colonization of Vietnam. The French Emperor, Napoleon III, prepared a military campaign against the Nguyen rulers in Vietnam in response to the execution of missionaries. The invasion force landed in September 1858 and captured the central coastal port of Da Nang, which was renamed Tourane by

French (Llewellyn et al. 2018). Confronted with the possibility of a full-scale French invasion, the Nguyen rulers signed the Treaty of Hué, the capital of the Vietnamese empire, in 1862. In this treaty, the Emperor Tu Duc ceded to France the control of Saigon and Vietnam's three southernmost provinces (Bien Hoa, Gia Dinh and Dinh Tuong). These territories formed the French colony of Cochinchina. The Vietnamese Emperor retained the imperial throne, but his independence and authority were weakened. After that, the French began expanding their grip on the kingdom. The Second Treaty of Saigon was signed in March 1874. It expanded Cochinchina to include the three additional provinces captured in 1867: Hanoi, Haiphong and the Red River. In 1883, another treaty granted the French the protectorate of the central (Annam) and northern (Tonkin) regions of Vietnam. The French Indochinese Union (in French, *Union indochinoise*) was officially created in October 1887 and included Cochinchina (south), Annam (central) and Tonkin (north), as well as Cambodia. Laos was added to the Union in 1893.

After the French intervention, the freedom of religion was guaranteed. Catholic priests and missionaries were afforded full access to Vietnam, and a French imperial order guaranteed no further persecutions or restrictions on foreigners and missionaries. However, the early years of French colonial rule in Indochina were a time of tension between missionaries and the colonial authorities. The French Third Republic was indeed a regime that placed two principal goals within its program for French national renewal: the expansion of France's colonial empire and the law on the Separation of Churches and States that established state secularism in France. The rise of an anti-Catholic French administration in Indochina led to efforts to reduce missionary influence in Indochinese society (Daughton 2006; Keith 2015). It should also be noted that the French Republicans in power had pursued a systematic policy of secularization since the French Revolution in 1789, and they tried unsuccessfully to apply the anticlerical French laws of 1901, 1904 and 1905 to Vietnam.

When the First World War broke out in 1914, about 400 French missionaries belonged to the M.E.P. in France's colony of Indochina. Resistance to mobilization was present among missionaries from the beginning (Becker 2000, 539) and many missionaries greeted the outbreak of war with concern. But M.E.P. reports (1914) related to the testimonials of some missionaries willingly leaving their position to join the front and stories of missionary martyrs for the nation, also served to confirm Catholic patriotism. During the war, the activities of the Church continued. So, M.E.P. reports that the Fathers of the Foreign Missions visited new religious congregations such as those of the French Franciscans who settled in Vinh, then in Nha Trang, and the French Dominicans in charge of the apostolate in Hanoi. The apostolate developed among the mountain ethnic groups with the creation of the new Vicariate of Kontum. So, the application of the principle of the organization of churches by native priests and bishops was also an important work of the vicars Apostolic and the M.E.P.. On the other hand, public education had grown in Indochina, with an important network of Indochinese schools (Franco-Vietnamese education). The M.E.P. reports also mentioned the creation of many schools before and during the two worlds wars: 1904, the Pellerin school (Huê); 1906, the

St Joseph school (Hai Phong); 1908, the St Joseph school (My Tho) ; 1906, the Batabamg school; 1911 the Miche school (Pnompenh); 1924, the St Thomas d'Aquin school (Nam Dinh); 1941, the Adran school (Dalat), etc. In this regard, some reports (1919–1925) insist on the difficulties specific to Catholic teaching, financed only by the missions and parishes, while some other reports (1926) deplore the neutrality of public education in Indochina. In addition, they affirm that, under cover of secularism, some schools encourage the spread of Buddhism and Caodamism, a new Syncretist religion that appeared in Cochinchina.

The inter-war period saw a change in the situation facing the Catholic Church in Vietnam. Catholic activities progressed in many areas during that period. The reports of the M.E.P. (1930-1938) indicate that the distribution of Catholics was very unequal within the administrative divisions of French Indochina, Cochinchina, Annam and Tonkin. While some provinces (Tonkin and Central Annam) had large Catholic minorities, this number was lower in Southern Annam, and Cochinchina was still not very much touched by evangelization. Thus, Tonkin was divided into nine vicariates led by the M.E.P. Annam had three vicariates, while Cochinchina had essentially the Vicariate of Saigon which was entrusted to the M.E.P. In 1930, the reports of the M.E.P. focused on the gravity of the economic crisis at the time in certain provinces of Vietnam and particularly in Tonkin: the considerable damage caused by the bad weather; the periods of famine; nationalist unrest which affected public peace in Tonkin and in Indochina; the attempts at insurrection; and the actions of the Indochinese Communist Party. This led to a drop-in business and a slump in rice sales, as part of the population could not afford to buy rice. In 1931, the Vietnamese Catholic community made up about one million out of about 15 million Vietnamese persons (Lange 1986). The influence of foreign missionaries remained important, but new responsibilities and functions were entrusted to the Vietnamese clergy. Consequently, the inter-war period was marked by the progressive evolution of the Church situation in Vietnam: the development of the local Vietnamese clergy and the nomination by Rome of Vietnamese bishops. The first was appointed bishop of Phat Diem in 1933.

On the eve of the Second World War, according to the M.E.P. reports (1938), Vietnamese Catholicism continued to grow, with an increase in the number of Christians and a regular influx of new converts. The development of Vietnamese clergy and the promotion of Vietnamese priests to the episcopate demonstrate the will of the Church and the M.E.P. to consolidate the future of the Church in Vietnam. In 1938, Pope Pius XI created the new Vicariate of Vinh Long who was part of the Saigon mission. A new Vietnamese bishop was also crowned in the same year. During the Second World War, the M.E.P. encountered many difficulties. The activities of the Church continued even if the missionaries' activities were affected by the war. Some French priests were mobilized to Europe; others received military postings and remained in Vietnam.

The Post-Liberation Period was followed by the Japanese occupation of Vietnam from 1940 to 1945. In 1945, the administration set up by the French "government of Vichy" was still in operation in French Indochina. After the Japanese coup of

March 1945, all Indochina fell under their power. During the episode known as the August Revolution, the Việt Minh took power in Hanoi on August 1945 and a secular communist state was founded. Within two weeks, forces under the Việt Minh had seized control of most rural villages and cities. On September 1945, the Vietnamese Communist leader, Ho Chi Minh, declared the independence of Vietnam from France and proclaimed the independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam. In 1945, Catholicism was one of Vietnam's main religion and 1.6 million Vietnamese were Catholics (Goscha 2011, 90). The church had 1400 Vietnamese priests and 330 European missionary priests for a population of 1,800,000 Catholics out of a population of nearly twenty million inhabitants. After the proclamation of the independence of Vietnam, the situation remained delicate for many French missionaries, still in the custody of Japanese troops, who remained in situ. However, the Việt Minh officially advocated for religious freedom. On 1 November 1945, one of Vietnam's Catholics from Phat Diem was ordained archbishop without the interference of French colonial administrators or European missionaries (ibid.). "The Franco-Siamese conflict of 1940 and the Japanese occupation in 1945 has terrible consequences for the Mission: persecution, missionary captured and sent into exile, two bishops and two missionaries, all M.E.P., killed as hostages." (Meroni 2019, 59) However, during the war, the situation of Vietnamese missionaries and priests varied from one region to another. The reports published by the M.E.P. between 1941 and 1947 just recalled the main political events in Vietnam, the Declaration of Independence in 1945, the failure of the Fontainebleau Conference, and the signing of a *Modus vivendi* between France and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1946. But there was no news about the vicariates under the care of the Vietnamese clergy. It specified a request for authorization for the missionaries to return to their posts and requested the right for them to visit the parishes of the vicariate. It also reports the excesses committed (murder of priests and nuns; arrest of missionaries; burning of churches, parish residences, nuns' convent, etc.). However, the situation of Vietnamese missionaries and priests varied from one region to another during the war years. From 1946 to 1949, Catholics dioceses carried out a neutral policy. Nevertheless, it seems that the repression against Catholic Church continued (Van Canh 1983, 169). Some church buildings were destroyed, and some church leaders were persecuted. Some French missionaries were imprisoned or grouped under house arrest, while the Vietnamese clergy ensured the continuity of the pastoral care of the parishes. In the vicariates, some Christians were under the control of the Việt Minh who imposed a communist ideology, while others stayed in areas occupied by the French army, or by the Franco-Vietnamese army, after the Halong Bay Agreements (in French, *Accords de la baie d'Along*, 1948) and the recognition of Vietnamese independence by France in 1949. Many Vietnamese nationalists and anti-colonialists took refuge in Catholic dioceses, under the protection of religious militias. On the other side, Pope Pius XII promulgated a decree in 1949 condemning the atheistic nature of communist doctrine and forbidding Catholics from participating in communist organizations, which further complicated the situation. The Geneva Accords of July 1954 marked the end of French rule in Southeast Asia.

4. The M.E.P after the French Colonization

After the war, the 1954 repartition of Vietnam resulted in the exodus of nearly one million people, involving approximately 600,000 Catholics or 65% of North Vietnam's Catholic population. Many of those fleeing had served in the French colonial administration and they feared political or religious reprisals under Ho Chi Minh's government. The arrival of these emigre's doubled the population of South Vietnam's Catholics. In many cases, entire parishes followed their priests south (Elkind 2014, 992). The Church in North Vietnam regrouped with only a few thousand members and about twenty-five churches. A Bible school was opened in Hanoi until 1964 when the war moved to the North, changing the situation. Then, the Church's activities were restricted throughout the country (Phu 1989, 22). Many seminaries were closed after the exodus and Christians lacked pastors. After the different land reform, the relationship between the local authorities and the parish are becoming increasingly tense (Nguyen et al. 2019, 530).

The reports of the M.E.P. give an idea of the situation of the dioceses in the years following Vietnam's independence. The Catholic hierarchy in Vietnam, with archbishops and suffragan bishops, was officially established in November 1960. The same year, the total population of Vietnam was estimated at 30,172,000, while the number of Catholics stood at 2,094,640, or 6.93% (EDA n°505), with about 500 priests, most of whom were Vietnamese. The M.E.P. report of 1964 insisted on the growing insecurity in some dioceses: machine-gun attacks and mines caused the death of some priests. In 1965, the war was mentioned as well as the discouragement and the desertion of the elites who sent their children abroad. The National Liberation Front (N.L.F.) of the South tried to liberate some villages by force, but a dozen dioceses were affected by war and N.L.F. attacks. There were thousands of refugees in the cluster villages. The report also mentioned the creation of a committee to ease tensions between Buddhists and Catholics. In 1968, the report of the M.E.P. mentioned only indirectly the N.L.F. offensive on cities, whereas the report in 1974 examined the consequences of the widespread offensive by the N.L.F. forces. The refugee problem became the central theme and priority of the dioceses. There were several thousand refugees near Cambodia's borders. Unfortunately, the Paris agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam (1973) was not respected, and the war between the communists and the pro-westerners persisted until the fall of Saigon (1975) and the reunification of Vietnam.

In April 1975, North Vietnamese forces seized Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, thus ending the Vietnam War. Vietnam was then unified under the communist regime. After the reunification, the Communists in Hanoi turned to the suppression of religion. They controlled all forms of public assembly, including assembly for religious activities. Therefore, the contacts between the Holy See and the Bishops were difficult. On the one hand, the Church in the South experienced a second exodus with the arrival of the Communists in 1975. On the other hand, the Church of the North was weakened by the policy of ostracism of the communist regime, which cut it off from the rest of the universal Church and the reforms of

Vatican II. However, the Catholic Church adopted a policy of dialogue with the communist state, despite “diplomatic isolation”. According to the M.E.P., there was a total of twenty-five dioceses in three Vietnamese archdioceses at that time. The Catholics in the South were officially numbered in an M.E.P. report (1975) as 1.9 million, including 15 bishops; 3,000 regular and diocesan priests; 1,200 lay brothers and 6,000 nuns. Four hundred priests and lay brothers, and 56,000 lay Catholics were estimated to have fled Vietnam in anticipation of a communist victory. At that time, the South had 870 parishes in 15 dioceses; Ho Chi Minh City alone had half a million Catholics served by 600 priests and 4,000 lay brothers and nuns. The fewer than 1 million Catholics in the North were served by about 3,500 churches attended by nearly 400 priests, 10 bishops, and 2 archbishops (Cima 2002, 167).

In 1977, the government issued a decree on religion that reaffirmed the constitution’s position on religious freedom. This depended on the compatibility of church activities with patriotism and socialism. The decree prescribed the duties and obligations of the clergy and imposed state control over the conduct of many religious services, but also education, training, travel, etc. (ibid. 166). It is therefore in this context that the Catholic Church needed to consider its relationship with the regime in power. The attitude of the Catholic hierarchy consisted of recognizing the new political authority. The Church advocated a policy of dialogue and cooperation. The Episcopal Commission also recommended that the Catholic people respect the authorities and participate in the re-construction of the country by referring to *Gaudium et Spes* and Vatican II. A Church-State Relations Committee, chaired by three archbishops and composed of priests and lay people, was established to discuss matters with Party leaders and senior state officials (Trần Thị Liên 2010, 348).

The Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, adopted in 1980, proclaimed that “citizens enjoy freedom of worship, and may or may not practice a religion” but that “no one may misuse religions to violate state laws or policies” (Cima 2002, 164–168). In 1983, a Committee for Solidarity of Patriotic Catholics was created to unite all Catholics. The regime’s concern was reflected in the establishment of a Religious Affairs Committee in 1985 to coordinate and supervise religious organizations. But the involvement in church affairs reportedly produced new strains in the relations with the Vatican. In 1987, Vietnam’s leaders convey the impression that the Roman Catholic Church was active in the affairs of the nation, and that church members were significant contributors to the socialist cause. Despite the Constitution’s protection of the practice of religion, the status of such was precarious in Vietnam in late 1987 (ibid.). The Unified Bishops’ Council of Vietnam was established in the same year to enlist the aid of bishops in persuading some members of the Catholic community to cooperate with the regime.

5. Conclusion

Throughout the centuries, the European powers, including France, developed an external discourse in which Christian reference was central. One of the Church’s

tasks was to orient its missions towards non-Christianized territories. So, Vietnam became a battle field of the antagonistic powers and was wavering between a context that was favourable or unfavourable to the establishment of Christianity. The reports of the M.E.P. have given an overview of the status of the Catholic Church led mainly by the French in Vietnam from the beginning, that is before the French colonization of Indochina, until the postcolonial period over the 1980s. In a large part of this work, we have used the M.E.P. reports of that have been embedded in the tumultuous history of Vietnam. It emerges from the creation of the M.E.P. that many efforts have been made to set up a religion in a territory that was not predisposed to Catholicism. Indeed, the main religions were, due to the influence of China, an amalgamation of the three great religions of East Asia: Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, onto which had been added a variety of animist beliefs.

The historical data obtained from the M.E.P. reports can be interpreted within a wider context. We can observe indeed several phases in the development of the Catholic Church in Vietnam. Some periods were favourable. In the 17th Century, the contribution of French Jesuit missionary, Alexandre De Rhodes was the most significant in this period. The Prince Nguyen Anh (later, Gia Long), the founder of the Nguyen Dynasty, also needed the help of Bishop Pigneau de Behaine. During his reign (1777–1820), the M.E.P. saw an opportunity to expand the Catholic Church's influence in Vietnam. Another positive period was at the beginning of the French colonization of Indochina, under the reign of Emperor Napoleon III. After that, many confrontations, trials, cultural and language barriers have emerged throughout the centuries, and have been carefully listed by the M.E.P. which played an important role in the evangelization of Vietnam, from the arrival of the Apostolic vicars until the events of 1975 and the creation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The data obtained from the M.E.P. shows that, over the centuries, the states or the established authorities have been mostly opposed to the development of the Catholic Church in Vietnam: first, the Nguyen Dynasty in 19th century; then, Napoleon's Concordat with the Catholic Church and the French anticlerical laws in the early 20th century; finally, the Communism during the Vietnam war. Therefore, while French missionary action experienced a boom throughout the 19th Century, a growing anticlericalism reached its peak with the French anticlerical laws in the early 20th century.

It appears in general that the development of the M.E.P. and its missions were considerable, despite the numerous and severe prosecutions of missionaries. On the one hand, the missions were often opposed by the established authorities. The Catholic mission was threatening to the local religion, and the coexistence of Catholicism alongside the classical Confucian system of Vietnam was difficult. On the other hand, confronted with growing anticlericalism, the mission was continually concerned about losing the political and financial support necessary for its international ambitions. Finally, France was extensively involved in Vietnam over the centuries, often to protect the work of Catholic missionaries, but it was not always favourable to the development of the Catholic Church in the country.

According to the reports of the M.E.P., France played therefore a key role, sometimes equivocal, in the emergence of Catholicism in Indochina, but also in Laos and Cambodia. After the Vietnam War and the development of Catholicism during the 1960s, it seems that the Catholic population is still growing in Vietnam along with the world's Catholic population. So, this survey of some of the activities of Catholics in Vietnam does suggest that Catholic missionaries were well organized and proactive throughout the centuries, and that the adoption of Christianity in Vietnam was achieved through cooperation, inter alia, between the M.E.P and the native population.

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