

Introduction

This book is about the rise of anti-Catholic violence in early nineteenth-century Vietnam and the profound social and political changes it created in the decades preceding French colonial rule. From the first years of the century, sweeping political reforms under the Nguyễn dynasty led to profound shifts in Vietnamese society. One organization that experienced the full force of these changes and in turn played a catalytic role in the unfolding political turmoil preceding the French invasion in 1858 was the Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP), a French mission society. Offering only a very narrow view of these overlapping developments and their repercussions, scholarship on mid-nineteenth-century Vietnam has generally concentrated on mission Catholicism, both its doctrine and organization, as a destabilizing force within Vietnamese culture and politics. Indeed, most studies focus narrowly on the years of upheaval bridging the Franco-Spanish invasion of 1858 to 1862, analyzing local tensions according to the imperial conquest and mid-century East Asian geopolitics.¹ As a consequence, analyses have overlooked the complex local situation that first gave rise to ten-

sions between Catholics and mainstream Vietnamese and later evolved into bitter sectarian division.

Drawing together the different experiences of Vietnamese Catholics, French missionaries, as well as Nguyễn mandarins at different levels of the bureaucracy, this study examines Catholicism's role in mid-century Vietnamese society and politics. According to prevailing conceptions, the anti-Catholic repression arose to a large degree from deep suspicions over cultural differences and Catholicism's incompatibility with "traditional" ways. Catholicism, a foreign doctrine, it has been argued, conflicted with local customs and lifeways, and wherever it spread tore at the fabric of society, polarizing communities and eroding traditional authority.² However, such views of local social relations ignore the impetus of cultural change in the shaping of 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 were increasingly disproportionate to and inconsistent with the threat posed by this community. Indeed, contrary to common perceptions of precolonial Vietnam, Catholics did not live beyond the margins of society. For much of the three to four decades preceding colonization, Catholics in many areas of the kingdom represented a relatively well-assimilated community, and negotiation and accommodation with non-converts were more often than not the norm.

CONTROVERSIAL HERITAGE

Modern scholarship has approached Vietnam's Catholic heritage from different perspectives, but undoubtedly the most controversial debates have centered on the at times ambiguous role of French missionaries in the diplomatic and political machinations that led to the French invasion of 1858. Written in Paris at the height of the Vietnam War in the late 1960s, Cao Huy Thuân's incisive—and controversial—dissertation, 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 fiercely anti-Catholic king Tự Đức.³ Similarly, writing a generation later, Nguyễn Văn Kiệm, a Hanoi-based historian of Catholicism in Vietnam from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, lambasted the lineage of fifth-columnist missionary agitators, all of whom he asserted had a piecemeal role in

destabilizing the Nguyễn dynasty and helping pave the way for the French invasion. Kiệt cites the renowned Bishop Pigneau de Béhaine—an MEP missionary seen in some quarters as having been instrumental in the establishment of the Nguyễn dynasty in 1802—as a particularly cunning “political conspirator” (*mưu toan chính trị*) whose machinations played a part in longer term French imperial designs.⁴

There is substance to the accusation that a number of late 1840s and 1850s missionaries played a crucial role in the political petitioning in France that led to invasion. But this is not the whole story. If the criticism directed at some missionaries has been in part warranted, the treatment of Catholics in contrast has been harsh and callous. For while French missionaries have been reviled as agents of imperialism, Vietnamese Catholics have been denigrated as traitors, collaborators, and French surrogates. A notable example is Đỗ Quang Hưng’s unforgiving appraisal of the Catholic church’s controversial Vietnamese heritage, which passed off the Nguyễn court’s hostility and episodes of mass violence—such as the execution of some 4,800 Catholics in Nam Định province in 1861—as a regrettable but justified response to a moment when the Nguyễn state faced a great “threat to national security.”⁵ Such black-and-white explanations characterize the dominant historical view of relations between Catholics and non-Catholics. But far from drawing on a solid foundation to demonstrate that Catholics posed an overwhelming threat to the kingdom’s independence and the dynasty, these assertions are based largely on very limited and selective documentary evidence.

Until the opening of the MEP private archive in the early 1990s, research on the mission’s role in nineteenth-century Vietnam was dependent on a mere handful of official mission sources—the published extracts of missionary correspondence found in official mission historiography on the period. The two mission historians to whom many modern studies—Vietnamese and Western—owe a great debt for these extracts are Fathers Louis-Eugène Louvet and Adrien Launay. Their combined works, which include general histories of entire missions and biographies of French missionaries and local martyrs, published between the 1880s and early 1920s, represent much more than simply the official chronicle of the mission’s endeavors.⁶ Rich in detail and insights into grassroots Vietnamese life and politics, Louvet’s and Launay’s collected works subsequently became the staple source in studies seeking either to demonstrate or to counter charges of Catholics’ culpability. But viewing Vietnam through the late-nineteenth-century Catholic worldview, their works suffer

from a peculiarly fundamental misrepresentation of sectarian tensions that can only be understood by explaining the social context in which they wrote.

Born in the decades of ascendant French nationalism and raised in a period coinciding with the first colonial incursions in Vietnam, Louvet (1838–1900) and Launay (1853–1927) first traveled to Cochinchina—southern Vietnam—in 1863 and 1877, respectively. Their arrival in the new colony coincided with the first waves of mass violence that followed the invasion, and this unquestionably loomed large in their perceptions of Catholic and non-Catholic relations and in their writings. Following the establishment of the French colonial beachhead in Cochinchina in 1862, the resettlement of Catholic refugees from elsewhere in Vietnam around Saigon and the reorganization of power relations in the region under French rule provided the basis for political differentiation between Catholics and non-converts, which consolidated over time into sharp divisions. The religious-based violence of these decades, where not only Nguyễn officials but also the royalist scholar gentry and peasants participated in the massacres of Catholics, had no precedent in the precolonial era.⁷ Nevertheless, Louvet and Launay's studies, narrated against the backdrop of boiling internecine hatred, depict a timeless and irreparable animosity between Catholics and "pagans." More than any other residual impression, this perspective of division and Catholics' social marginalization has remained a dominant feature in modern Vietnamese historiography.

Postcolonial studies by Vietnamese scholars since 1954 have approached the task of explaining anti-Catholicism from a very different set of political sensitivities. With the exception of several notable pro-Catholic works—by Fr. Phan Phát Huồn in the former Republic of (South) Vietnam, and Fr. Étienne Võ Đức Hạnh, who wrote in Paris in the 1960s⁸—scholarship has overwhelmingly taken a critical and highly politicized view of local Catholics and the mission. Initially, due to political sensitivities, official socialist historiography produced in postindependence Hanoi portrayed Catholics as valued members of the newly independent nation. Far from being marginalized within the new political setting, the newly powerful Vietnamese Workers Party (the Communist Party after 1976) co-opted the northern Catholic community into the Socialist-Leninist agenda as part of a wider drive to neutralize social divisions. The process of reconstruction after nearly a decade of conflict with the French—beginning straight after World War II—necessitated a politically pragmatic approach as the state sought to reduce the threat of internal instability from minority groups potentially hostile to the new regime.

Nevertheless, Catholics faced considerable scrutiny in north Vietnam for their political role in the recent colonial past. In his landmark chronicle of the French invasion, official historian to the new regime Trần Văn Giàu emphasized the unity with which all sections of society, all religions, and members of all ethnic groups, resisted the French invaders.⁹ In rewriting Vietnam's history in the early postcolonial era from a strictly Marxist and Vietnamese nationalist framework, Giàu and others sought to divorce the portrayal of Vietnamese identity from the ambiguity and complications of religious affiliation. As such, the church's activities were described within a strict discourse that narrowly focused on its role in contributing to national reunification and reconstruction. In this way the Vietnamese church's activities could be compatible with the Party-state's nation-building agenda. But this approval early in the independence era represented a truce rather than unqualified acceptance. Subsequently, the church's heritage faced highly varying degrees of scrutiny and criticism according to changing intellectual moods reflecting nation building, conflict, and the post-1975 reconstruction.¹⁰

Undoubtedly the most contentious shift in perceptions of Vietnam's Catholic heritage occurred with Pope John Paul II's mass canonization in 1988 of 117 martyrs from various persecutions in Vietnam. Against the backdrop of ongoing Cold War tensions, not to mention John Paul II's support for Poland's Solidarity movement, the canonization—one of the largest in Vatican history—was understandably interpreted by Hanoi as an openly hostile provocation. Many of these martyrs, the first of which died as far back as the seventeenth century, had been officially viewed as rebels and criminals. Father Joseph Marchand, for example, was convicted by the court of Minh Mạng in 1835 for his involvement in a secessionist rebellion in Gia Định—modern-day Ho Chi Minh City. And while the majority of the martyrs were Vietnamese, twenty-one were missionaries, including eleven Spaniards and ten French. In all, 111 of the group were executed or died after 1833—in the tumultuous decades preceding the French invasion of Indochina and the end of Vietnamese independence.¹¹

The Vatican's mass canonization sparked a wave of controversy in the Vietnamese scholarly community. But more important it placed the question of Catholic history squarely on the table for historical researchers. If earlier works produced by Hanoi had been too cautious or restrained in regard to discord between Catholics and non-converts, after 1988 scholars wasted no time in reevaluating the contribution of Catholics to the nineteenth-century upheavals. This reversal, which also occurred against the backdrop of the great

uncertainties created by the sudden collapse in 1989 of Vietnam's most important economic sponsor and political ally, the Soviet Union, is made all the more interesting for coinciding with the rehabilitation at this time of the Nguyễn dynasty in official scholarship. Where once scholars derided the dynasty and its "feudal" social structures as "reactionary" and as much of an enemy to the "masses" as French imperialism,¹² more sympathetic voices began to cast the Nguyễn dynasty in a new and somewhat sympathetic light, emphasizing its legitimacy and downplaying the systemic failures that dogged its efforts to deal with the French invasion.¹³ In effect, criticism of the church's nineteenth-century legacy dovetailed with the state's reappraisal of its dynastic predecessor. The conjunction between such reappraisals reveals the significance of historiography in the ongoing narration of Vietnamese history and official views on Vietnamese identity.¹⁴

Precisely because of this tangled web of politicized representations a new appraisal of social change and especially religious relations in dynastic Vietnam is needed. The bloody record of religious violence in the nineteenth century was not an inevitable consequence of the incompatibility of Catholic beliefs with local lifeways or entirely attributable to the intrigues of missionary fifth-columnists. Nor can French colonial rule, as the catalyst for Vietnam's violent transition to the modern era, be held solely responsible for igniting religious tensions. Offering a fresh interpretation of events, this book draws on the rich archive of personal mission correspondence and the Nguyễn dynastic chronicles to illuminate the local dimensions of the rise of anti-Catholicism.

THE CONTEXT OF CHANGE: THE MISSION IN COCHINCHINA

From the early 1820s, two distantly related developments dovetailed to give rise to the surge of anti-Catholic sentiment. Under emperor Minh Mạng (r. 1820–40), Huế embarked on a series of bureaucratic and social reforms designed to enable the Nguyễn to consolidate its rule in areas of Vietnam it had never governed before, the north of Tonkin or *Đàng Ngoài*, and in areas it sought to govern with greater direct control, especially the far south in the Mekong Delta and the countryside surrounding Gia Định, modern-day Ho Chi Minh City. Coinciding with these endeavors, the *Missions Étrangères* in Vietnam enjoyed an unprece-

dedented rise in support in France and elsewhere in Europe on the back of increasingly well-coordinated print and publicity. After decades of stagnation brought about by the French Revolution and exacerbated by Napoleon's reign, the MEP's fortunes turned after 1815, leading to a resurgence in its activities in the Far East, especially in Vietnam. Mission work there was aided by the inflow of secure funds from Europe and an unprecedented interconnectivity with church organizations back in France. More than any other development early in the century, this conjunction was to have a precipitous role in reshaping Vietnamese society and establishing community divisions on the eve of colonial rule.

The Nguyễn dynasty was the first—and last—to rule over all modern Vietnamese-speaking territories. Yet the correlation between this remarkable political achievement and the profound and ongoing effects of territorial unification under the Nguyễn in 1802 on social and cultural identities in Vietnam has only recently received the attention it deserves. Following on from the groundbreaking works of Nola Cooke, Li Tana, and Choi Byung Wook, this study concentrates on Cochinchina—Đàng Trong, the southern half of Vietnam, and especially the region surrounding modern-day Ho Chi Minh City, known as Gia Định—which included the township of Gia Định—or by the mid-nineteenth century as the Six Provinces (*lục tỉnh*), of which Saigon became the French capital.¹⁵

Apart from seeking to capitalize on the findings of these studies, there are other good reasons to focus on Cochinchina to explore the rise of Nguyễn anti-Catholicism. The turmoil that engulfed Vietnamese Catholics in the nineteenth century unfolded in two overlapping contexts: the contestation over religion and cultural diversity, and the process of political and territorial integration. And nowhere in Vietnam are the broader repercussions of these two more readily visible over the course of the century than in the dramatic changes that took place in the far south. I focus on this region because it was here that the MEP first gained privileged access to the upper levels of the Nguyễn regime in the last decades of the eighteenth century, in what was essentially a symbiotic relationship. And Cochinchina—Đàng Trong was also the first region to fall under French rule decades later in the 1860s. But far from seeking to set southern experiences of political and social change apart from the rest of the kingdom, this book also covers events in other areas of the kingdom, notably during the anti-Catholic campaign in the late 1830s.

Against the backdrop of Nguyễn political expansion and the MEP's rising fortunes, this study begins by exploring grassroots experiences of the consolidation

of Nguyễn rule in the reigns of its first two rulers, Gia Long (r. 1802–19) and Minh Mạng (r. 1820–40). Chapter 1 provides background on the developments within the Nguyễn state and the MEP organization in the early decades of the century. Where once Nguyễn rule in Cochinchina had been characterized by social and cultural fluidity in religious identities—a situation that continued well into the 1810s under King Gia Long—the reign of the second Nguyễn king, Minh Mạng, from 1820 brought rapid change. Responding to the dangers of regionalism, Minh Mạng instigated sweeping reforms from the 1820s. By creating new opportunities in education and in opening paths of advancement in the bureaucracy, the dynasty sought to dismantle regionally focused affiliations in society.¹⁶ But its success was far from uniform; in fact it created as many divisions as it sought to obliterate. As part of these centralizing efforts, the court adopted an oppressive stance on religious heterodoxy in particular. For the MEP, which had only just started to recover, these developments gathered momentum at a fateful point. Not only did the 1820s see an influx of a sizeable wave of young missionaries to the Cochinchina mission centered in Gia Định, also in this period the MEP gained for the first time sole authority over the local ecclesiastic hierarchy in the southern half of the kingdom and was able to apply a more rigorous indoctrination of converts than had been possible in earlier decades.

Under Minh Mạng, the Nguyễn dynasty was transformed into an imperial power, extending Vietnamese rule at its height in the 1830s deep into Cambodian and Lao territory. The transformation also entailed a fundamental change in the way the dynasty related to minority religious and ethnic groups within the kingdom. Huế sought to reorganize the kingdom's sites of worship and spiritual power to strengthen the new capital's authority. Dangerously for the mission, the new court also increased scrutiny of religious communities that did not accord with Nguyễn doctrinal sensibilities. As Chapter 2 shows, the court became increasingly wary of the growing influence of the mission in grassroots society and concerned for the challenges it posed to Huế's imperial vision. To curb the mission's expansion, the court issued its first anti-Catholic proscription edict in January 1833. However, the proscription coincided with the rise of anti-Huế sentiment within southern society, which exploded in May in a secessionist rebellion. The presence of an MEP missionary, Fr. Joseph Marchand, in the rebellion raised the specter of mission subterfuge and provided the justification for a campaign of persecution.

Chapter 3 examines the impact of the anti-Catholic repression in the late

1830s. In the aftermath of Lê Văn Khôi's secessionist rebellion, the court intensified its efforts to destroy the local church and the mission. But despite the rigorous approach to bureaucratic reform in earlier years, and its increased attempts to exert greater control at the district and village level, the campaign's results were far from successful. Resistance in village society to the more brutal aspects of the proscription frustrated Huế's efforts to crack down on the church. During this period the development of a black economy, in which Catholic communities avoided the harsh penalties of the proscription by bribing local officials, greatly complicated relations with authorities. Increasingly frustrated by the spread of such arrangements, the court imposed greater penalties and offered ever greater rewards for the capture of missionaries and priests. In the end, far from heralding the precipitous decline of the church, the late 1830s campaign only marginally weakened the missionary presence; at the same time it undermined trust within the bureaucracy and in official relations with grassroots society.

These developments not only draw attention to the potential rivalry between the Nguyễn court and the MEP, which was consolidating its position in grassroots society, they also reveal the changing conditions of greater interconnectivity between societies in Asia and Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century. By the 1840s, as Chapters 4 and 5 show, the dynamics of nineteenth-century globalization enabled the increased presence of European imperial powers in Southeast Asia for political and economic conquest. Advances in communications and transport had increased public awareness in Europe of societies and cultures in the Far East, and had given rise to new contingencies in cross-cultural relations. This can be seen clearly in the new possibilities created by greater interaction between the French mission on the ground in Vietnam and Catholic communities in France. The MEP's exploitation of print capitalism by mid-century, to cite a prominent example, saw the publication and dissemination throughout Europe of the correspondence of priests from missions around the world in prominent Catholic journals such as the *Annals of the Propagation of the Faith*. In effect, the MEP came to regulate perceptions of Vietnamese society and Nguyễn oppression for French audiences in the decades before the very first French imperial encounter, the naval bombardment of Đà Nẵng in 1847.¹⁷

The popularity of the *Annals* led to a huge rise in subscriptions to the journal between the early 1820s and the late 1830s, which was no doubt fueled by the dramatic stories of persecution in places such as Vietnam and China. As

subscriptions increased, funds and donations flooded into the *Annals* and subsequently its principal affiliate, the MEP, which for the first time in its history was able to lavish its missions with a steady flow—thanks to safer and more frequent shipping to Asia—of finances for its activities. In places like Vietnam where religious oppression had forced the mission and Catholics underground, these funds played a major role in alleviating official sanctions: they provided much needed cash to bribe officials for safety from the threat of arrest, or to remove Catholics from strife and extortion. Over time, such arrangements drew Catholics, their non-convert neighbors, and local officials into tighter circles of dependence. More important, they created what can only be described as a black economy of bribery and extortion that provided Catholics with a degree of protection but gave rise to one of the most destabilizing dynamics to affect the Nguyễn dynasty's political economy. By fueling the greed of low-level officials, mission funds undermined the foundations of integrity among village and district officials on the periphery of central rule. Aware of this degradation, the court attempted but ultimately failed to sanction corruption. In the end, as a consequence, frustration at the inconsistent treatment of Catholics—and more generally the deterioration of uniform action—throughout the bureaucracy heightened the panic of senior officials when the dynasty faced its greatest crises in the 1850s, making extreme action the only attractive option.

Apart from exploring themes specific to mid-century Vietnam, this book also seeks to contribute new understanding to the background of inter-religious hostility in nineteenth-century Asia. The situation in Nguyễn Vietnam represents just one example of wider transitions elsewhere in the region where peripheral communities such as Catholics became central to the attentions of multiple political centers and a battleground for the imposition of competing ideological visions. Pulled in different directions, by the Catholic church in France and the Nguyễn state in Huế, Vietnamese Catholics were forced to renegotiate and reinterpret their position, both in local social settings and in relation to the state and official authorities. In the process, new patterns in community behavior emerged, local notions of the duality of religious affiliation and political loyalty within society shifted irrevocably, and the means by which people and communities asserted their identity acquired new forms of expression. In brief, the historicization of religious violence and social change is crucial for a more nuanced perspective on the dramatic shifts in the region's political and social identities.

SOURCES

While official perspectives from the court can tell us much about imperial attitudes and shifts within official circles, such insights must be complemented by considering, as Ralph Smith noted on mid-nineteenth-century Vietnamese dynastic politics, the realities of “the relationship between government and society.”¹⁸ Despite the heavy hand of central rule as the chief protagonist in state-society relations, village society’s resistance to the implementation of official policies demands attention. In short, in studying early Nguyễn Vietnam we need to be attuned to “the political and social realities of the period rather than of the Confucian ideal.”¹⁹ For 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. 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 we will see, 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 tension between state views and local lifeways that I explore the rise of Nguyễn hostility to Catholicism.

This study draws on the experiences of those directly involved in the era’s broad shifts, Catholics and non-converts, missionaries and mandarins. And to tell their stories I draw on two principal sources: the personal correspondence of French missionaries based in Cochinchina and modern Vietnamese translations of several of the Nguyễn dynastic chronicles. Each of these offers its own invaluable insights into change in the nineteenth century, and likewise each suffers from particular prejudices that can hinder our understanding of events. The Nguyễn dynasty *Veritable Records*, which I use extensively in this study, for the 1830s Minh Mạng era, for example, were not published until 1866—two decades after the 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 a zealous Catholic worldview.

Moreover, the cultural context in which a Nguyễn official dictated a memorial to the throne and an MEP priest drafted a private letter to a friend or family member in France derived from two very different worldviews. Indeed, it is hard to imagine two more dissimilar mental universes than those inhabited by

missionaries and mandarins in the mid-nineteenth century. But perspectives do not necessarily alter facts, or at least undo experiences of events. And many events, such as the issue of proscription edicts, arrests, and interactions between missionaries and officials, as well as executions described by missionaries in their letters to France, are also reported, often in detail, in the Nguyễn chronicles. Despite the obvious ideological differences that would have informed a mandarin or a missionary in his description of an event, there is nonetheless some compatibility between these sources that allows ample evidence for corroboration.

Like most historians of Vietnam looking at this period, I am in the first instance dependent on the official chronicles of the Nguyễn dynasty, many of which have been translated from classical Chinese into modern Vietnamese—*quốc ngữ*—since the 1960s. In particular, I draw on the Nguyễn *Veritable Records* (*Đại Nam Thực Lục*) and the Nguyễn selected biographies (*Đại Nam Liệt Truyện*) of prominent officials, members of the royal family, and other notables deemed pertinent to the course of the dynasty's history. Such works have been used with great success in several important studies, most notably Alexander Woodside's groundbreaking analysis of the Nguyễn bureaucracy and Philippe Langlet's exhaustive study of Nguyễn elite culture and state historiography.²⁰ But undoubtedly the most important source for my work is the volumes of private, unpublished correspondence in the archive of the Missions Étrangères in Paris. As this archive was only opened for public research recently, around fifteen years ago, it is a great privilege to have had the opportunity to explore its materials and provide a new interpretation of the events in which missionaries and Catholics were involved. For a long time, only published and edited versions of this correspondence had been available to non-mission researchers. It is therefore one aim of this book to utilize these rarely used materials in a manner that will shed new light on the personalities and experiences of their authors.

The MEP archive is not solely composed of mission correspondence. In the dense volumes, and indeed within the narratives of letters, are numerous extracts and quotes of Vietnamese Catholics, priests, non-converts, and Nguyễn authorities. In most cases these have been rendered in French, but sometimes extracts appear in vernacular Vietnamese. These offer fascinating insights into encounters between missionaries, priests, and mandarins, such as the intriguing exchange in 1844 between Mgr. Dominique Léfèbvre and the prominent southern governor and general Nguyễn Tri Phương on Catholic healing and medicine. The inevitable question arises, however, of whether we can rely on the memory and integrity of the missionary authors in their reporting of others' experiences and dialogues.

I attempt at every opportunity to corroborate events, conversations, and the sentiments of communities with other available evidence. It is, nevertheless, illuminating to read these records against the grain for what they can reveal to us of shifting mission attitudes. We are also spared the danger of overreliance on missionary narratives by the abundance in the archive of French translations of important Nguyễn court documents; these include extant versions of proscription edicts and internal legal papers and judgments issued against Catholics in certain infamous cases. More than the official chronicles, these records offer crucial insights into bureaucratic workings and attitudes from the period.

Finally, in seeking to link perceptions of events using French and Vietnamese sources, contrasting experiences of change, and exploring the unique perceptions of missionaries and mandarins, this study seeks to broaden the use of combining indigenous and “foreign” perspectives in the reconstructing of the Vietnamese past. Despite their vastly different social and religious sensibilities, mandarins and missionaries had much more in common than is immediately obvious. Throughout the years of anti-Catholic hostility, we see time and again officials acting to maintain order between Catholics and non-converts in their bailiwicks and, perhaps out of compassion, seeking to limit the impact of some of the harshest measures of the proscription. Of course, many mandarins were unswerving in their oppression of the religion. But the overwhelming experience is of stability and respect for human life. Similarly, missionaries regularly, where feasible, sought to open and maintain channels of communication with officials. Despite loathing the actions of particularly hostile mandarins, most missionaries tried to create the means for negotiation to ensure a modicum of safety from threat for congregations.

Above all, the most insightful aspect of missionary and official experiences is the potential they hold for illuminating the circulation and integration of “foreign” culture within the local social landscape. After living for years and sometimes decades in Vietnam, missionaries became as much a part of the local world as their neighbors and confreres. Their insights into local lifeways provide an important prism through which we might better understand the local world and especially the dramatic changes ushered in by French colonial rule.