

## Strange brew: Global, regional and local factors behind the 1690 prohibition of Christian practice in Nguyễn Cochinchina

Nola Cooke

*In 1690, the previously sympathetic Nguyễn ruler of Cochinchina (located in south-central modern Vietnam) prohibited Christian religious practice in his state. Uniquely in the history of Catholicism in early modern Vietnam, however, the ban did not lead to a persecution of believers. The following article, based extensively on archival materials from the Missions-Étrangères of Paris, historicises this event and the steps leading up to it in 1688–89. It argues that to understand what was happening on the ground in Cochinchina, and why, we need to analyse the way global and regional factors intersected with local, and even personal, ones to cause a prohibition of Christian practice in early 1690, an event for which internal Catholic dissention was almost entirely responsible.*

### Introduction

Systematic Christian evangelisation began in the area of modern Vietnam in the early seventeenth century, after the 1614 anti-Catholic prohibition in Japan sent a handful of Jesuit missionaries to explore this new field. The region that later became known as Cochinchina was their first area of sustained endeavour there.<sup>1</sup> Despite occasional setbacks, the mission slowly expanded. Many thousands of local people

Nola Cooke is a Visiting Fellow in the Division of Pacific and Asian History in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at The Australian National University. Correspondence in connection with this paper should be addressed to: nola.cooke@anu.edu.au. My thanks to the Australian Research Council, whose funding made possible the research for this article; and to Father Gérard Moussay; the archivist, and his indefatigable assistant, Brigitte Appavou, at the Missions Étrangères de Paris. I have not had access to unpublished Jesuit records for this era.

1 At this time, Cochinchina comprised former southern provinces of the Lê kingdom of Đại Việt, from current Quảng Bình south to Phú Yên, and was known popularly as Đàng Trong. It was north of nineteenth-century colonial French (or Lower) Cochinchina. The Nguyễn family was in the process of transforming the region into a separate state during the period under consideration. For some of the earliest Jesuit experiences, see the account of Cristoforo Borri in *Views of seventeenth-century Vietnam: Cristoforo Borri on Cochinchina and Samuel Baron on Tonkin*, introduced and annotated by Olga Dror and K. W. Taylor (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2006), pp. 136–80; see also the account of his experiences in the 1620s and 1640s by Alexandre de Rhodes in *Rhodes of Vietnam: The Travels and missions of Father Alexandre de Rhodes in China and other kingdoms of the Orient*, trans. Solange Hertz (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1966).

sought baptism in the ensuing decades, despite intermittent official suspicion and even outright persecution in the 1640s. Meanwhile, in Rome at much the same time, elements in the Vatican were patiently seeking to modernise overseas missions by circumventing the 1492 papal grant to the Iberian crowns (Portugal and Spain) of patronage rights over all such missionary activity. Under these restrictive arrangements, the Iberian crowns enjoyed the legal right to appoint all priests to Asian missions, a privilege reinforced by the nations' long monopoly on transport between Europe and the east, and to insist they be integrated within the Portuguese or Spanish ecclesiastical hierarchies that existed there. The Vatican reformers, however, wanted to institute overarching papal authority in new missions, through the 1622 Roman Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (*Propaganda Fide*), and to create a body of indigenous clergy. By the 1650s, Rome also recognised the growing need to establish bishops in new missions, such as those in the Vietnamese-speaking states of Tonkin and Cochinchina, since only prelates could administer the sacrament of confirmation and, equally as important for the Propaganda, consecrate local priests, something the Portuguese had long resisted.

Spurred on by this situation, and after years of torturous political manoeuvring, in the 1650s, the Vatican finally decided to put its own men in charge of newly organised ecclesiastical jurisdictions in Asia by creating apostolic vicariates in Indochina (and China) rather than normal bishoprics like those in Goa or Macao. Bishops in all but name, apostolic vicars were to be independent of Portugal or Spain as the direct delegates of the Holy See, to whose papal occupant they owed their ecclesiastical powers.<sup>2</sup> In Indochina, these apostolic vicars were placed at the head of two new missions, Tonkin and Cochinchina, to which Siam was soon added. The first incumbents were French, as were all the apostolic missionaries who accompanied them in the early 1660s or followed thereafter. Unlike the Jesuits, these men were not members of a religious order (or 'regulars') but ordinary or 'secular' clergy, meaning priests who lived and worked out in the world rather than under the sworn discipline of religious orders, a form of spiritual community that, in earlier ages, had originally been enclosed and separate from society. These secular priests all came from the newly formed Société des Missions-Étrangères de Paris (or MEP).<sup>3</sup>

The decision to turn Jesuit missions into apostolic vicariates, under the jurisdiction of French priests responsible directly to Rome, without first repealing the legal rights of the Portuguese crown to ecclesiastical patronage over them, although understandable in the context of the time, was to prove disastrous. It freighted the new endeavour with ill-consequence for both missions and local Catholics by seeding the new apostolic vicariates with bitterly fissiparous conflicts and irreconcilable enmities almost from the start.<sup>4</sup> In Cochinchina, inter-corps relations were so soured by the early 1680s that, in 1684, the Pope demanded resident Jesuits quit the mission under

2 For this period generally, refer to Henri Chappoulie, *Aux origines d'une église: Rome et les missions d'Indochine au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1943), vol. 1, ch. 1–5; or more recently, Jean Guennou, *Missions Étrangères de Paris* (Paris: Le Sarmant Fayard, 1986), ch. 2–8. The first half of Adrien Launay, *Histoire générale de la Société des Missions Étrangères*, vol. 1 (Paris: Tequi, 1894) covers this era.

3 The Foreign Missions Society of Paris

4 For these early relations, refer to Guennou, *Missions Étrangères*, pp. 126–31, 136–7, 139–44.

threat of excommunication. But when the new ruler, Chúa Nghĩa (r. 1687–92), demanded Macao send back his personal physician, the Macao-born Jesuit Barthelémy d'Acosta, feuding reignited in 1688, and this time far more virulently. Within 12 months, priestly factions had embarked on a bidding war for local Christian support. In an increasingly frenetic atmosphere of claim and counter-claim, rumour, allegation and political denunciation, anxiety and fraught emotions escalated within the Christian community, especially in the urban areas of Huế and Faifo. Finally, tensions boiled over into such culturally abhorrent behaviour in certain Faifo and Huế churches that the formerly sympathetic Vietnamese ruler banned Christian religious practice in early 1690. When missionaries from very different backgrounds and, as we will see, with very different allegiances within the seventeenth-century Catholic Church imported their irreconcilable hostilities into the Cochinchina mission, it catalysed such an explosive brew within local Christian society that it brought the whole mission to the edge of disaster.

It has only become possible to salvage the larger story of the 1690 prohibition on Christian practice in Cochinchina since the MEP opened its archives to scholarly research. No extant sources exist from the Vietnamese side;<sup>5</sup> and few European accounts have mentioned it. The 1858 Jesuit documentary history of the Cochinchina Mission ignored the 1690 ban,<sup>6</sup> as did the general histories of the Missions Étrangères by former MEP archivists, Adrien Launay and Jean Guennou, while Louis-Eugène Louvet's classic colonial era account attributed it solely to the mission's 'enemies' managing deceitfully to win over the ruler.<sup>7</sup> If Launay's three-volume 'documentary' history of the Cochinchina mission did include some information on the immediate background and causes of the prohibition, it did so in a way that badly obscured the full picture. Key documents were ignored; others were censored, doctored or even bowdlerised. For instance, the archivist excised whole pages of a valuable letter from Jean-Baptiste Ausiès, dated 15 July 1690, as well as deleting or changing crucial words in it before inserting a new bridging sentence to smooth over the tampering, all without any indication of extensive editorial intrusion into the original. The result transformed a long, angry tirade against local Jesuit behaviour and their contempt for papal authority into a text in which the word 'Jesuit' never appeared.<sup>8</sup> In a mid to late

5 The solitary reference to Christianity in seventeenth-century Cochinchina was to its later prohibition by Minh Vương (r. 1692–1725) in 1698, wrongly dated to 1699 in the Vietnamese translation of the nineteenth-century dynastic chronicle. Refer to *Đại Nam thực lục tiền biên* [Chronicles of Đại Nam, early records], trans. Nguyễn Ngọc Tinh (Hanoi: Sử Học, 1962), p. 154, hereafter *Tiền Biên*. This entry wrongly reported European missionaries were expelled. Although all were imprisoned, and some consequently died, none were physically removed, as would later occur in 1750.

6 *Mission de la Cochinchine et du Tonkin*, ed. M. de Montézon and E. Estève, SJ (Paris: C Douniol, 1858).

7 E. L. Louvet, *La Cochinchine religieuse* (Paris: Challamel aîné, 1885), vol. 1, p. 315. These 'enemies' were a mixed group of Portuguese residents, Jesuit-influenced Vietnamese and two Macao Jesuit priests.

8 Adrien Launay, *Histoire de la mission de la Cochinchine, 1658–1728, Tome I, Documents historiques, 1658–1728*, reprint (Paris: Archives des Missions Étrangères / Les Indes Savantes, 2000). Comparing Launay, pp. 364–5 to the complete archival document, shows that Launay added the sentence beginning 'Toutes ces choses ...' midway on p. 365 to cover the removal of more than two pages highly critical of two Jesuits. There is no indication that the letter continued for five more pages, nearly all of which discussed disastrous inter-corps relations. Jean-Baptiste Ausiès to Le Grand, 15 July 1690. Archives of the MEP [hereafter AMEP], vol. 736, pp. 353–64.

nineteenth-century era of confident missionary (and then colonial) expansion, it would seem both sides preferred quietly to bury the unedifying evidence of former enmities.

Launay did not invent this approach. Other colonial era editorial interventions in published materials dealing with inter-corps relations proceeded to the same end: to expunge or obfuscate detailed MEP reports about Jesuit manoeuvres against Vatican authority, as delegated to the Pope's apostolic vicars, and to veil the resulting abyss of ill-will dividing Jesuits from French apostolic missionaries. Louvet, for instance, blamed all problems within the mission on 'the Portuguese', as did Launay, who regularly changed references to MEP adversaries from 'Jesuits' or 'Jesuit Fathers', 'Fathers of the Society' (*les pères de la Compagnie*) or the names of those involved, to a blanket 'Portuguese'. The 1864 published version of the memoirs of Bénigne Vachet, who had been a missionary in 1670s and early-1680s Siam and Cochinchina, also bowdlerised the original text. Marked-up copies in the MEP archives show how all Vachet's countless angry references to Jesuits were literally either ruled out or replaced with bland references to 'the Portuguese' or the 'enemies of the mission'.<sup>9</sup> For its part, the Jesuit history of 1858 equally sanitised intra-mission hostilities, and preferred not to rehearse deeply held differences from the time.<sup>10</sup>

Such discrepancies between archival materials and published documents purporting to represent those materials are disturbing. But at least they alert historians to the need to re-examine missionary activity in Indochina at this time outside the bland frameworks of Catholic apologists like Louvet, a project now underway in France and most notably represented by Alain Forest for the Tonkin and Siam Missions.<sup>11</sup> To understand the events that caught up the late seventeenth-century Cochinchinese Christian community, however, we need to look even further afield, to controversies in contemporaneous church history in Europe as well as to events in Asia. In particular, it is essential to take into account the intractably intermeshed complex of conflicting rights and convictions regarding ecclesiastical jurisdiction and elements of reformed Catholicism that created and sustained inter-corps feuding in Cochinchina, as in other mainland Asian missions. In the 1670s and 1680s, this intrusive, destabilising and debilitating state of affairs drained the time, efforts and emotions of all missionaries, and impacted negatively on local Christian communities. Certainly, without its dark enfolding obsessions, it seems most unlikely to me that the 1690 prohibition on Christian practice in Cochinchina would ever have happened. For this reason, the analysis begins with these problematical issues.

### **Padroado Jesuits and French missionaries: A Constricting web of oppositions**

The pattern of inter-corps hostility that wove itself around Christians and missionaries in all later seventeenth-century Asian missions can be analysed into four strands. First was the clash between the longstanding rights of Iberian crowns to

9 Bénigne Vachet, 'Mémoire pour servir à l'histoire générale des missions et aux archives du séminaire de Paris', AMEP vol. 110(b), 111(b), 112(b) and 113(b) contain the corrections.

10 De Montézon and Estève, *Mission de la Cochinchine et du Tonkin*, p. 253. While Gennou's discussion is even handed, his account still ignores Cochinchina from the 1670s onwards.

11 Alain Forest, *Les missionnaires français au Tonkin et au Siam XVIIe-XVIIIe Siècles* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998), 3 volumes.

appoint all ecclesiastics in Asian missions: this right was now claimed by the papacy through the Sacred Congregation of the Propaganda and the apostolic vicars, but strenuously denied by all Portuguese (and almost all Portuguese authorised) priests in *padroado* lands. Second was the persistent opposition of an influential regular order (the Jesuits) to the Vatican desire to establish modern, secular prelates in Jesuit-pioneered Asian missions. Third was the rejection by existing regular missionary orders of Rome's plan to establish mission seminaries to train locally born priests from among whom it would ultimately choose indigenous prelates to fill residential bishoprics. Finally, and overlaying these contradictions, there was a fourth element, the powerful reformist impulse to recharge Catholic spirituality by separating sacred from profane in religious practice, regardless of its impact on existing privileges or local accommodations and currents of acculturation.

Focusing on the most intractable of these conflicts – the struggle over ecclesiastical jurisdiction, with its complicated overlay of European politics and proto-nationalism in Asia – has tended to obscure the rest and thus, blur the overall pattern. When all strands are considered together they reveal quite a different design, for they all arise from central tenets of Counter-Reformation (or better said post-Tridentine) Catholic reform.<sup>12</sup> That several such concerns wind through all the conflicts and controversies to beset the Asian missions from the mid-seventeenth century onwards, including the famous Rites Controversies,<sup>13</sup> indicates the fundamental nature of the problem. Viewed from this broader perspective it seems obvious that the mid-seventeenth-century arrival of papal-appointed apostolic vicars drew missions at the Catholic Asian frontier into a similarly protracted and painful – if ultimately less successful – version of post-Tridentine reform that had occurred in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in Europe. In Asia, however, distance magnified difficulties, distorted differences, deformed local realities and made volatile grassroots rivalries almost impossible to control from hundreds or thousands of kilometres away. Whereas in early modern Europe, potentially risky Catholic reform attempts had been more or less contained by millennial Catholic traditions and the interests of Catholic princes, at the global Christian periphery the introduction of reformist missionaries would, like a poorly controlled experiment, catalyse corrosive boilovers and violent eruptions.

12 'Tridentine' refers to the long-running Council of Trent (1545–63) which formulated the Catholic response (long known historically as the Counter-Reformation) to the Protestant Reformation. For more on the Council's role, refer to R. Po-Chia Hsia, *The World of Catholic renewal, 1540–1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), ch. 1, or Robert Bireley, *The Refashioning of Catholicism, 1450–1700* (London: Macmillan, 1999), ch. 3.

13 Very briefly, the Chinese and Malabari Rites controversies were missionary disputes about the extent to which local cultural elements could legitimately be adapted into the faith as evangelised in Asia. Generally speaking, Jesuits (and Franciscans) supported a wider acceptance of local cultural adaptation than did the MEP (and Dominicans), for whom the religious content of many local practices disqualified their adaptation into Catholicism. In Vietnam and China, these arguments often revolved around whether ancestral and other cults, like the veneration of Confucius, were wholly religious or comprised certain acceptable 'civil' elements that could be adopted and adapted. Rome ruled twice on these issues in the eighteenth century, both times supporting the narrower views. In the wider context of Catholic reform, these disputes also echoed post-Tridentine struggles to purify the religion by removing age-old temporal accretions.

In some respects, this conflict looks very modern. It pitted the defenders of long-established legal rights and privileges, vested in particular sectional groups like the Society of Jesus, against the champions of newly emergent rights, rights that had been created by institutional and ideological reforms and were fought for by men committed to those reforms. At the time, and for centuries after in some respects, elements of this conflict still remained unresolved in Europe. When exported to the Asian missions via the new apostolic vicariates, and most notably to Cochinchina, the resulting friction triggered an ugly, long-running schism between Jesuits appointed under Portuguese patronage (*padroado*) and French secular newcomers licensed by the Propaganda that would only finally be resolved, in the mid-eighteenth-century, with the suppression of the Society of Jesus.<sup>14</sup> At various times in the 1670s and 1680s, Rome acted vigorously to support its men in Asia, most notably in 1684. The anti-Jesuit Pope Innocent XI formally ordered local Jesuits, through their General Oliva, to swear obedience to the apostolic vicars or see Jesuit noviciates closed down. Recalcitrants were also excommunicated, with absolution only possible in Rome.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it was only due to this imperious intervention that Jesuits had briefly quit the Cochinchina mission in the mid-1680s.

Such compulsion could only be used sparingly, however, and never for long enough to impose a permanent resolution in Rome's favour. Continued Iberian opposition ensured the Vatican never dared unilaterally cancel the 1493 legal grants of ecclesiastical patronage, so that a change of circumstances in Europe, like the forging of new political alliances or the election of a different pope, immediately opened the door to manoeuvres by Portuguese interests. Even more effective in the long run was the patient and persistent opposition of the Society of Jesus. By the later seventeenth century, the Jesuit order had effectively evolved into the first well-organised, highly influential corporation with a global reach, and its members in Asia were determined to mobilise the Society's full influence to protect the fruits of their century-long evangelising endeavour there. Yet despite all this, and even if the most salient point of conflict was always ecclesiastical jurisdiction, in my view the arrival of French apostolic vicars and their missionaries in mid-seventeenth-century Jesuit missions would always have generated sparks, for it forced into incompatible proximity two highly charged currents of reformed Catholicism, one from its earliest pre-Trent dawning and the other a mature product of post-Tridentine reform.

The Society of Jesus, a powerful regular order organised along military lines, had been synonymous with Catholic reform in sixteenth-century Europe.<sup>16</sup> In 1540, its founder, Ignatius Loyola, had deliberately positioned the new Society outside the institutional hierarchy of the Church, with Jesuits actively discouraged from accepting bishoprics. Instead, they devoted themselves to papal service, principally as teachers or missionaries. In recompense, the pope had quickly granted Jesuits certain privileges

14 Even so, several Vietnamese Jesuit priests and previously Jesuit-administered villages in Tonkin refused for years to allow MEP missionaries to take over when the Jesuits were disbanded.

15 Guennou, *Missions Étrangères*, p. 221; Richard P. McBrien, *Lives of the popes* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), pp. 310–11.

16 Jonathan Wright, *God's soldiers* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), ch. 1–3; John W. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1993).

and exemptions from diocesan control that helped foster a sense of corporate autonomy outside the normal hierarchy. The Society's 1545 mission rules accentuated this trend by completely ignoring relations with the episcopate. A century later, Jesuit experience in distant missions, especially in the Iberian empires, had often transformed this sense of distinctiveness into effective local independence from episcopal oversight.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps in part because of this greater autonomy, Jesuits made fine missionaries, both in Reformation-era Europe and the wider world. They early learned the value of co-opting elements of popular religiosity in evangelism, and of using inducements such as music, plays or theatricalism to entice people to church,<sup>18</sup> where their sympathetic awareness of human moral frailty ensured the sacraments were widely available. Despite their missionary successes, however, in Europe it was as educators that Jesuits made their main contribution to Catholic reform, although more by default than design.

Trent's main reforming thrust had bypassed the regular orders to focus on reorganising the institutional hierarchy of the Church along strongly centralist lines; on reforming the secular clergy; and on restoring Catholicism's depleted spiritual capital. These trends all intersected in one of the Council's main concerns, to ensure that prelates actually resided in their dioceses where they were charged with overseeing the spiritual and moral life of the parishes. Their assistants in this endeavour were to be a new sort of secular clergy – sober, celibate, morally impeccable, spiritually motivated, and above all submissive to superior ecclesiastical authority flowing downwards from the pope – who were meant to be trained in local diocesan seminaries. A major innovation, this reformed and revitalised priesthood was to be 'a professional clergy, more capable of resisting the infiltration of lay practices in sacramental life, better qualified to correct lay superstitions by teaching right doctrine and, on the whole, capable of guarding the holy from the profane....'<sup>19</sup> In practice, however, funding constraints, and the diehard defence of a hotchpotch of medieval rights and privileges by existing local beneficiaries, both clerical and lay, drastically slowed the establishment of diocesan seminaries. Instead, Jesuit colleges and universities filled the gap, greatly strengthening the Society's influence in Europe.<sup>20</sup> So formative would this pedagogic experience prove that one Jesuit-educated MEP missionary in Cochinchina despaired of ever being able to convince former school friends of the perfidious disobedience of 'the Jesuits of the East',<sup>21</sup> while self-serving Jesuit accounts of events in late 1680s Indochina were so widely believed in Europe that applicants to the MEP seminary began to dry up in the 1690s, leaving it quasi-deserted for many years into the eighteenth century.<sup>22</sup>

17 Guennou, *Missions Étrangères*, pp. 220–2; O'Malley, *The First Jesuits*, pp. 285–7; C. R. Boxer, *The Church militant and Iberian expansion 1440–1770* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 65–71 and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese empire in Asia, 1500–1700: A Political and economic history* (London and New York: Longman, 1993), pp. 263–6.

18 For example, see *The Jesuits: Cultures, sciences, and the arts, 1540–1773*, ed. John W. O'Malley et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), pp. 565–98.

19 Hsia, *Catholic renewal*, p. 116.

20 Ibid., ch. 7.

21 Ausiès to Le Grand, 15 July 1690, AMEP vol. 736, p. 364.

22 Guennou, *Missions Étrangères*, pp. 228–9.

In France, many of these new secular priests, like many early MEP missionaries to Cochinchina,<sup>23</sup> tended to come from a particular social background: their comfortable families were urban-based, often involved in legal or civic affairs, might have minor noble connections, and ensured male members received a good education. Once ordained, these men tended to distrust sensuality and the body, abhor clerical immodesty, and actively sought to separate spiritual from worldly matters. Their personal lives were shaped by lengthy spiritual exercises and physical mortifications such as fasting, practised in the hope of pleasing God and thus deserving Divine Grace. Their austere religion stressed prayer, the centrality of the sacraments, and submission both to God's will and to the authority of the pope, Christ's vicar on Earth. Its spiritual wellspring was the mystical current of piety so influential in France at the time, whose extreme manifestation was repeatedly condemned as Jansenism.<sup>24</sup> The initial MEP apostolic vicars to the Indochinese missions, François Pallu and Pierre Lambert de la Motte, epitomised this austere current of seventeenth-century French Catholicism when they wrote: 'for an ordinary Christian, all his earthly existence must be a continual penitence'.<sup>25</sup>

This moralistic spirituality of elite French Catholicism contrasted sharply with the colourful religiosity common in other Catholic areas such as Italy or the Iberian kingdoms, and often embraced by Jesuits from those places.<sup>26</sup> If Jansenists detested Jesuits (who heartily reciprocated),<sup>27</sup> ordinary pious French clergy might equally mistrust showy Jesuit ceremonial, tolerance of popular religiosity, championing of moral Probabilism,<sup>28</sup> and, as it was perceived in France, their 'wide laxity regarding conscience to adapt Catholic doctrine to society'.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, anti-Jesuit feeling in such French circles was particularly high when the MEP was founded, thanks to the controversial expulsion of a Jansenist academic from the Sorbonne which had provoked Pascal to publish his *Lettres provinciales* (1656–57) attacking both Jesuits and the university.<sup>30</sup> Jesuits internationally would have been well aware of this whole story, of course, long before the first apostolic missionary ever set foot in the east.

When the new French secular apostolic missionaries finally reached the Indochina peninsula, in early 1660s Siam, therefore, they embodied a form of Catholic practice that, like their reform agenda, was alien to *padroado* religious life.<sup>31</sup> Faced with their

23 For biographical details, see the *recherche* link on the website of the MEP archives, at <http://archivesmep.mepasie.org/recherche/index.php> (last accessed on 8 July 2008).

24 For Jansenism and Jesuits in France at the time, refer to William Doyle, *Jansenism: Catholic resistance to authority from the Reformation to the French Revolution* (London: Macmillan, 2000), ch. 1–4.

25 François Pallu and Pierre Lambert de la Motte, *Monita ad missionarios. Instructions aux missionnaires de la S. Congrégation de la Propagande*, reissue (Paris: Archives des Missions Étrangères, 2000), p. 22.

26 Hsia, *Catholic renewal*, pp. 42–59, 66–73. Doyle says the worst excesses of Jesuit 'free-will theology and tangled casuistry', which French Jansenists so treasured, often derived from 'Iberian Jesuits unaware of how explosive their ideas might prove across the Pyrenees'. Doyle, *Jansenism*, p. 36.

27 Hsia, *Catholic renewal*, pp. 200–2, 207–8.

28 Probabilism held that Catholics could follow a moral opinion supported by one reputable theologian, even if other, and stronger, opinions disagreed.

29 Hsia, *Catholic renewal*, p. 207.

30 Doyle, *Jansenism*, pp. 28–34. Peace was finally brokered between all parties in 1669, but it never dried up the Jansenist current of thought in France.

31 As Forest rightly notes, they were the 'moderns' of the time. Forest, *Les missionnaires français*, vol. 3, pp. 9–25.



new centrist demands, no local Jesuit ever willingly conceded the Vatican's right to direct control of missions pioneered by the Society, nor accepted the authority of the new prelates, apostolic vicars who depended directly on Rome and not on the legally established, long-existing Portuguese sees. Just as objectionable was the goal of these newcomers, which was to establish modern European seminaries<sup>32</sup> to train local priests to work alongside existing religious missionaries, with the ultimate aim of establishing a regular indigenous hierarchy and confiding residential bishoprics to its priests. Portuguese Jesuits especially found this idea anathema.<sup>33</sup> It is likely, too, that the rest of the apostolic vicars' reform agenda – combining elements drawn from the Propaganda's 1659 instructions to apostolic vicars and others worked out in detail at a 1664 synod in Siam and published by the Propaganda in 1669 – was equally offensive to local Jesuits, if only because of its criticism of their missionary practices and traditions in Asia. The instructions to apostolic missionaries that resulted from the Siam synod threw down the gauntlet in its very first lines, accusing all existing mission orders of having fallen so far from their early successes that they had not only 'abandon[ed] almost all care for the people confided to them', but also '[lost] interest in their own salvation'.<sup>34</sup>

The Propaganda's unworldly 1659 orders, whose values infused the 1669 instruction, well illustrate the extreme nature of reformed post-Tridentine spiritual values, especially in regard to the defence of sacramental purity from lay or profane influences. This ideal had very wide ramifications. For example, apostolic missionaries were instructed to eschew all temporal concerns, including holding local civil office,<sup>35</sup> notwithstanding that Jesuits did exactly the opposite and happily exploited their expertise in medicine or mathematics to win court posts from which they might influence local elites. In Siam in 1664, an MEP synod made this general injunction specific by condemning and prohibiting certain century-old Jesuit practices in Asia.<sup>36</sup> If Jesuits chose to live like local elites in order to cultivate privileged social circles, the synod denounced such behaviour as excessive care for the body and a sinful desire for personal glory. These, the synod then declared, were two of the main temptations apostolic workers had to resist.<sup>37</sup> Jesuits, too, funded their missions through commerce. Their profits may have underwritten comfortable lifestyles but, more importantly, they also helped maintain missions, support local Christians and purchase protection for them when needed. To the MEP synod, however, missionary commerce was simply 'bad and illicit in every case' and in every form, even indirectly, or if undertaken to benefit the poor. MEP missionaries were strictly banned from it.<sup>38</sup> Building on the

32 Forest, *Les missionnaires français*, vol. 1, pp. 230–1; vol. 3, pp. 135–6.

33 Forest, *Les missionnaires français*, vol. 3, p. 37. Also see Boxer, *Church militant*, ch. 1. In Cochinchina, this was less controversial than in Tonkin: there were too few Vietnamese priests here and they were mostly trained in Siam, often for up to 20 years. The adjustment problems they suffered on return soured seventeenth-century MEP missionaries' attitudes towards local clergy, making them closer to Portuguese views in this respect.

34 Pallu and Lambert, *Monita ad missionaries*, p. 21.

35 *Ibid.*, ch. 1 and 3.

36 The synod's injunctions remained the standing instructions for MEP priests until the nineteenth century. Refer to Launay, *Histoire générale*, pp. 98–108.

37 Pallu and Pierre Lambert, *Monita ad missionaries*, pp. 21–5.

38 In 1669, Clement IX extended the ban to Catholic missionaries everywhere, but with limited success.

Propaganda's praise for 'detachment from the things of the world',<sup>39</sup> the synod also ruled apostolic missionaries must resist the temptation to trust in 'purely' human means – both a gross exaggeration and implicit denunciation of longstanding Jesuit tactics – even if their mission seemed poised to fail.<sup>40</sup> Only a truly penitential and exemplary apostolic life could win God's grace and thus ensure mission success, the synod agreed, an admonition that rested on the impossibly idealistic conviction that all temporal failure arose from spiritual inadequacy.<sup>41</sup> Lastly, and again in direct contrast to Jesuits who had long explored the possibilities of Christian acculturation in complex eastern societies such as China and Japan, MEP missionaries tended to perceive any but the least such accommodation as a form of moral and spiritual laxity.<sup>42</sup> All of this, and more like it, understandably antagonised local Jesuits, to whom the French must have seemed presumptuous upstarts and ignorant critics of a seasoned way of life and method of evangelising.

The uncompromising spirit of the Siam synod came to Cochinchina with the first visit of its apostolic vicar in 1672. A meeting was held in Faifo that gathered together the majority of catechists (Bénigne Vachet's later memoirs wavered between 30 and 80 of them) and a handful of Vietnamese priests, all graduates of the MEP college in Siam and none with more than four years' experience in the ministry, mostly in Siam.<sup>43</sup> Although invited, no Jesuits attended. Pierre Lambert wasted no time in seizing the high moral ground: the synod's very first resolution insisted no catechist could operate without first accepting the papal Bulls that established the authority of the apostolic vicar and seeking his approval. The synod then laid down a number of rules governing the baptism of converts, dispensation of marriages and so forth, all of which implied that existing [Jesuit] practices had been faulty in these areas.<sup>44</sup> The underlying sense of stiff-necked reformist superiority that infused these new rules is best revealed in their concluding admonition: catechists should 'often inculcate into the Christians that it is not enough to preserve the faith in one's heart but it is necessary for one's salvation to profess it publicly by mouth, as St Paul says, even at the peril of one's life'.<sup>45</sup> The existing Jesuit catechism, compiled in Vietnamese by Alexandre de Rhodes in the 1640s and used thereafter by local catechists, had long urged precisely that. It taught that 'we

39 Pallu and Lambert, *Monita ad missionaries*, pp. 41–2. The synod actually characterised the argument that missions in some countries depended on trade for their success as an 'anti-apostolic heresy'.

40 Launay, *Histoire générale*, p. 100.

41 In the struggle with local Jesuits, this might manifest as ugly self-righteousness. For example, Jean de Courtaulin delighted in the unshriven death of a senior Jesuit who had come to Cochinchina hoping tooust the French. 'God fights for us', de Courtaulin exclaimed, adding 'if we had the spirit of the ancient law we would sing the canticle of Moses but the spirit of the Gospel obliges us to mourn his death'. De Courtaulin to Bishop Lambert, n.d. (in pencil '1675'), AMEP vol. 734, pp. 179–80.

42 For the Jesuits, refer to Andrew C. Ross, 'Alessandro Valignano and the culture in the East', in *The Jesuits*, pp. 336–51. For Vietnam, refer to Peter C. Phan, *Mission and catechesis: Alexandre de Rhodes and inculturation in seventeenth-century Vietnam* (New York: Maryknoll, 1998).

43 Pierre Langlois to M. Gautrin, 28 Aug. 1671. AMEP vol. 713, p. 64.

44 Vachet made this point explicitly, in comments produced decades after the event and thus liable to some confusion at times. Refer to Launay, *Mission de Cochinchine*, vol. 1, p. 106, and for the synod generally, pp. 106–12. For a contemporaneous account, see *Relation des missions et des voyages des évêques vicaires apostoliques et de leurs ecclésiastiques es années 1672, 1673, 1674, & 1675* (Paris: Charles Angot, 1680), pp. 45–7.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 47. Launay excerpted this source in *Mission de Cochinchine*, vol. 1, pp. 107–8.

must rather suffer death itself than deny God or the Christian way, even on our lips'<sup>46</sup> and in the 1660s, at least 70 local Christian men and women, including many experienced catechists, had followed it to the letter when the ruler, Chúa Hiền, insisted they renounce their faith. That these martyrs were Jesuit trained never won their pastors any plaudits, or even credit, from the over-zealous apostolic missionaries. Certainly none seemed willing to adopt the charitable view that any religious practices deemed unacceptable in the early 1670s Cochinchinese Christian community might have been due as much to the devastating impact of the 1660s persecution as to any Jesuit laxity.

If the unconscious spiritual arrogance of the newcomers raised local hackles, conditions at the religious frontier in Asia also worked to discourage any Portuguese respect for the French. In Catholic Europe, successful post-Tridentine reforms had relied heavily on the self-interested backing of civil powers. In mainland Asia, however, the *padroado* issue imposed adamant civil hostility to all Vatican assertions of authority over the Church, even to the point of French missionaries being imprisoned by Portuguese officials. In Asia, too, the secular clerical status of apostolic missionaries diminished them in local colonial eyes. Unreformed, often local-born, secular clergy here still retained a lowly, pre-Tridentine rank. 'The *clerigos* of the Indies [were held] in extreme contempt on account of their little talent, knowledge, and bad conduct', one missionary reported, and were mostly 'the lackeys of the Jesuits and other Portuguese religious'.<sup>47</sup> Being 'only *clerigos*'<sup>48</sup> therefore did nothing for French status among the 'Portuguese of the Indies ... a jumble of mestizos of all nations, slaves, and other rabble'.<sup>49</sup> Jesuits, by contrast, were so highly regarded locally that they reportedly acted as if they recognised no effective authority outside the Society. 'When the Pope has decided our differences with the French Bishops, if he does not favour us we will consider his reasons', the Italian Jesuit Joseph Candone informed Jean de Courtaulin in the early 1670s. To Vachet, he confided: 'if the Portuguese Fathers saw the Holy Spirit descend to confirm the French Bishops, they would not obey', adding that 'according to our [Jesuit] constitution, we cannot live in any understanding with Bishops'.<sup>50</sup> So perplexing was Jesuit obduracy before Vatican authority that Guillaume Mahot, titular bishop of Bide, wondered in 1675 if 'they would like to establish a new Church here, like the King of England'.<sup>51</sup>

This absence of collegiality fatally poisoned the atmosphere of the mission. One senses from the hundreds of pages of MEP archival documents covering this period that underlying much French hostility to and hyper-criticism of the Jesuits was the sense of brotherly betrayal, of *falsum fratribus*, a bitter realisation that the very people who should have been their closest allies in this alien world, Catholic priests like

46 Phan, *Mission and catechesis*, p. 307. Roland Jacques has argued convincingly that this catechism was most likely the product of a combined Jesuit effort in 'Le Portugal et la romanisation de la langue vietnamienne'. Refer to Roland Jacques, *Les missionnaires portugais et les débuts de l'Église catholique au Viêt-nam*, vol. 1 (Reichstett, France: Đinh Hướng Tùng Thú, 2004), pp. 126–30.

47 Anon., 'Relation des affaires de Cochinchine, 1689', AMEP vol. 736, p. 302.

48 The parting insult hurled at Labbé by a mob of Jesuit partisans in July 1689, Labbé to Maigrot, 17 Aug. 1689, AMEP vol. 736, p. 293.

49 Anon., 'Affaires de Cochinchine, 1689', AMEP vol. 736, p. 304.

50 Mahot to the Propaganda, July 1675, AMEP vol. 734, p. 93.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

themselves, were instead their worst enemies, apparently untrustworthy, conniving and undeserving of their high vocation. And, making matters even worse, in the late 1680s Cochinchina mission, the French were confronted with two particular Jesuits with whom they had virtually nothing in common, either personally or professionally. As colonial products of the Iberian empire, Macao-born and raised Barthelemy d'Acosta, of Japanese descent, and Nicolas Fonseca, a Chinese mestizo, were literally worlds apart from the French, but perfectly at home in Cochinchina. Their insights into local customs and perceptions, and their ability to exploit local culture in their favour, gave these men a real advantage over the foreign French. As we will see below, this was especially obvious in their skill at using the ever-churning Cochinchinese rumour mill against the apostolic missionaries, something the earnest French found intensely irritating and very hard to counter.

Like most ideologically driven reformers, apostolic missionaries were too often blind to their own role in conflicts and incapable of detecting merit in their opponents or in the status quo. Confronted in Siam, and then in Cochinchina, with the unreformed practices of a frontier Portuguese Church, disparaging French missionaries sniffed laxity everywhere, from the rumoured disorderly personal conduct of *padroado* priests to their unacceptably permissive administration of the sacraments. The colourful local religious culture particularly grated on austere French sensibilities, making even colonial Portuguese divine services appear improper, outdated and offensive.<sup>52</sup>

I could not say how much ... all these Portuguese of the Indies are accustomed to the comedies and mummeries that make up almost all their religious exercises. They have never seen vespers or [any] other offices sung in all the Churches of their Portuguese Regulars ... If they sing something during the mass, they are I don't know what motets in Latin or in their own tongue. For there is music among all the Religious, and the musicians are black mestizos<sup>53</sup> who howl in a manner fit to terrify and put to flight all men of good sense, but which charms those like themselves and often excites them to dance throughout the Blessed Sacrifice which is still made part of their solemnities...

[But should anyone comment on this] immediately they treat him as a Heretic ... and threaten him with the Inquisition.

Given such sentiments, it is no surprise that *padroado* Jesuits often riposted by denouncing French missionaries as Jansenists, an ironic charge since, unlike real Jansenists in France, the apostolic MEP missionaries prided themselves on being the champions of papal authority in the Church generally.

All these inimical oppositions wove a web of enmity around French missionaries and local Jesuits in Cochinchina, from the 1660s onwards. Neither side ever willingly sought to disengage itself from this poisoned net by initiating any real compromises with the other. While MEP missionaries believed, most sincerely, they were the injured innocents in this relationship of mutual incomprehension, on the rare occasions that the archives reveal Vietnamese Christian reaction to mission factionalism, one glimpses

52 Anon., 'Affaires de Cochinchine, 1689', AMEP vol. 736, pp. 305–6.

53 African slaves had existed in Macao from at least 1563. Refer to Pierre-Yves Manguin, *Les portugais sur les côtes du Viêt-Nam et du Campā* (Paris: EFEO, 1972), pp. 184–5.

quite a different picture, for the great majority of local Christians blamed both sides equally. Even without the inflammatory presence of resident Jesuits, after they had all been recalled in the mid-1680s, some MEP missionaries remained obsessively unable to let the feud die. In late 1684, for instance, alarm bells rang with the accidental visit of Jesuit Father Jean Maldonat. During his sojourn, Maldonat had given in to local Christian requests and carried out his priestly functions despite being empowered only for Siam. The apostolic vicar's deputy, pro-vicar Marin Labbé, promptly refused to meet him socially, for fear it would validate Maldonat's activities in local eyes,<sup>54</sup> while in Huế Pierre Langlois compelled all who had confessed to Maldonat to repeat their confessions to him. Although praising Langlois' zeal, Robert Noguette in Faifo wondered whether it all might have been better ignored. The Christians, he warned, 'believe more strongly than ever that for a long time there has been a mortal hatred and an irreconcilable enmity between us and the Fathers of the Society of Jesus'. These 'good folk hardly know what [an ecclesiastical] jurisdiction is ... and as previously all these Fathers of the Society had this jurisdiction, they do not know if his Holiness has stripped them' of it or not.<sup>55</sup> In the circumstances, there seemed little sense in stirring old emotions.

However, such sane advice was only feasible in the absence of resident Jesuits. But in 1687, the Nguyễn crown prince wrote to the Senate in Macao asking for the return of Barthélemy d'Acosta, who had left Cochinchina in early 1684 under an excommunication that could only be lifted in Rome. After succeeding to the throne, Chúa Nghĩa (r. 1687–91) made a second, more peremptory and successful, demand for d'Acosta.<sup>56</sup> Schism reignited almost immediately on his return. To understand why, we need to consider the third component of the 1690 disaster, the local Christians, and ask why they allowed this damaging schism to continue, despite the authenticated papal documents and best endeavours of the French missionaries.

### **Cochinchinese Christians and the mission schism, c. 1670–1687**

The French reached Cochinchina long after the heyday of the seventeenth-century Jesuit mission there. Between 1615 and 1627, the Society had sent 24 men there,<sup>57</sup> but after the expulsion of foreign priests in 1639 only seven arrived in the next 20 years. Conversion rates and congregation maintenance naturally suffered: in the early 1660s, possibly only about 10 per cent of the 60,000 Christians routinely claimed in Jesuit sources actually remained, along with three Jesuit priests.<sup>58</sup> Even so, at least 70 local Christians chose martyrdom over apostasy in the bloody mid-1660s persecution, among them, as noted before, numerous long-serving catechists, all Jesuit trained.<sup>59</sup>

54 This 'discourtesy' provided ammunition for a Jesuit anti-MEP campaign as far away as Europe. See Noguette to Laneau, 12 Mar. 1685, AMEP vol. 736, pp. 25–7, 29; Maldonat to Laneau, 23 Mar. 1685, *ibid.*, pp. 35–7 and Ausiès to Laneau, 16 Mar. 1686, *ibid.*, p. 110.

55 Noguette to de Courtaulin, 26 Jan. 1685, AMEP vol. 726, p. 55. These sentences are in reverse order.

56 Manguin, *Portugais sur les côtes*, pp. 211–12.

57 De Montézon and Estève, *Mission de la Cochinchine*, p. 386. Half were Portuguese, with six Japanese, five Italians and one Frenchman (de Rhodes).

58 Guennou, *Missions Étrangères*, p. 137.

59 According to an MEP report from Siam, by the late 1660s, the Nguyễn ruler specifically targeted catechists and sent away ordinary Christians who came seeking martyrdom. Langlois to Gautrin, 28 Aug. 1671, AMEP vol. 713, p. 64.

The Christian community began slowly rebuilding from the later 1660s, assisted by the arrival of two new Vietnamese priests, recently ordained by Lambert in Siam, and two French missionaries. But then in 1670, Jesuit partisans proclaimed the Society's claim *in absentia* to sole jurisdiction in Cochinchina. When d'Acosta returned in 1671, schism had flared immediately.<sup>60</sup>

In the physical absence of the apostolic vicar, still living in Siam, and his papal documents, it is no surprise that local Christians returned to the churches of their first pastors. But how could the Jesuits later maintain this internal division, when the apostolic vicar's papal appointment and authority was reportedly well known among local Christians? This is a far more interesting question; and to answer it requires an examination of Cochinchinese Christian perceptions of the inter-corps hostility for, without Jesuit ability to rekindle Christian support when the MEP believed it all but extinguished, schism could never have persisted.

In this regard, the most important facilitating factor was surely that most ordinary converts never really understood the issues at stake. Only a comparatively small group of core Catholics at this time ever grasped the argument about ecclesiastical jurisdiction, for instance. Several reasons account for this. First, after the 1660s persecution, there were simply never enough knowledgeable and exemplary catechists in the 1670s and 1680s to indoctrinate large numbers of converts adequately in the religion, let alone in the intricacies of distant Church hierarchies and powers. Mahayanist Cochinchina even lacked a comparable Buddhist institution, like the Theravadan *sangha*, that might have provided a sort of cross-cultural model for such a clerical organisation, meaning these difficult alien concepts would undoubtedly have needed repeated reinforcement. This would have been especially true for Christians outside Hué or Faifo, who usually went for months, or indeed years, between pastoral visits. Without constant reminders, it was easy for converts to apply their own cultural logic to the internecine conflict, something, as shown below, that always favoured the Jesuits. Second, rather than form a settled or united group, or even a comparatively small number of communities, Christians were restlessly scattered in groups of various sizes among several hundred kilometres of coastal provinces and mountain hinterland, so that lack of regular access to believers compounded the problems of inadequate indoctrination. Finally, numerous MEP reports suggest that most ordinary Vietnamese at the time displayed an instrumental or pragmatic attitude towards religious adherence, including Christianity, taking it up or setting it aside according to how well it satisfied their needs. Poorly instructed (or uninstructed) new converts thus always swamped the small number of committed core Catholics, and fed a persistent Christian current of opinion that ignored or downplayed issues of authority<sup>61</sup> or jurisdiction in the quest for priestly services like confession. And even Catholics of several generations' standing might put other factors ahead of obedience to papal authority: the Japanese

60 For details on the early 1680s, refer to Guennou, *Missions Étrangères*, pp. 136–7, 139–41, 153–5, 161–3, 170–4 or Launay, *Histoire générale*, pp. 122–7, 146–51, 193–201, 227–32 and 248–51 for a MEP view.

61 For instance, Marin Labbé reported 'many' Christians tried to hide their sins in confession, including refusing to admit to confessing to d'Acosta or to being involved in superstitious practices. The French often relied on Christian neighbours' denunciations to uncover such transgressions, Labbé to Laneau, 19 Mar. 1692, AMEP vol. 737, p. 188.

Christians in Faifo, for example, never deserted their compatriot, Barthelemy d'Acosta.<sup>62</sup>

Failure to understand the complex reasons that underlay MEP behaviour towards the Jesuits allowed the original pastors to win people back, or keep enough of them undecided, by appealing to other factors. If their open purses bought them gratitude in some quarters,<sup>63</sup> comfortable Jesuit relations with women always attracted female Christians, who formed the majority of believers. More generally, their tolerance for human weakness gained friends among those whose marital situation or personal behaviour failed more exacting French standards, especially among Christian officials whose civil duties necessarily implicated them in superstitious practices.<sup>64</sup> The nature of early Christianity in Cochinchina also opened doors for Jesuits. At the time, Christianity was popularly considered a healing religion with magical overtones that promised eternal material rewards to those who had kept its rules (essentially, the Ten Commandments) and had been forgiven their sins by a priest.<sup>65</sup> After Bishop Lambert excommunicated d'Acosta in 1675, for instance, many ordinary Christians had expected the Jesuit to die. When he failed even to sicken, many 'ignorant and crude Christians [said] this made them believe the excommunication was not genuine',<sup>66</sup> according to the report of a Jesuit catechist. As this suggests, popular thinking disregarded the religion's spiritual complexities in favour of its magical qualities: baptism by holy water was widely believed to save lives, so its opposite ought to be fatal. If not, the excommunication cast doubt on Lambert's powers. Similarly, untutored converts also believed priestly powers and jurisdiction came directly from God, so that 'the pope could not strip [a priest] of powers that God had given him'.<sup>67</sup> In 1689, d'Acosta invoked precisely that notion in his own defence when he asked rhetorically, 'Don't all priests have power from God ...?'<sup>68</sup> This sort of culturally intuitive reasoning, which was rarely described in French reports but undoubtedly common among the broad mass of local Christians, always assisted the Jesuit cause. But just as important was their ability to capitalise on local knowledge and to exploit Vietnamese cultural logic to muddy the jurisdictional waters.

Aware that broad currents of popular misapprehension flowed beneath any surface submission to the French, local Jesuits or their supporters magnified Christian uncertainties in culturally ingenious ways. One very successful method of keeping converts off-balance and open to persuasion was to circulate ingenious lies, malicious

62 De Courtaulin to Laneau, 15 Jan. 1680, AMEP vol. 734, p. 498.

63 For instance, refer to Mahot, 'Relation des principaux choses qui se sont passés en Cochinchine (du mois d'avril 1674 jusques au 27 mars 1675)', *ibid.*, p. 63. This accusation rarely appears in earlier years, probably because the French could still afford to distribute alms themselves in the first two decades.

64 Jesuits reportedly made greater allowances for lending money at interest (regarded as the sin of usury in Europe at the time), included some local customs in funeral ceremonies, and smoothed the way for marriages with non-Christians. De Courtaulin to Laneau, 15 Jan. 1679. *ibid.*, pp. 299–300.

65 In 1674, when Chúa Hiên asked about Christianity, Mahot said 'it consisted of ten commandments, which it was necessary to explain in full, and to say something of the punishment those who transgress this law will suffer and the recompense that those who keep it will receive'. 'Relation des principaux choses', 1675, *ibid.*, p. 53.

66 De Courtaulin to Lambert, n.d. (marked in pencil '1675'), *ibid.*, p. 177.

67 Noguette to Laneau, 21 Jan. 1689, AMEP vol. 736, p. 152.

68 Labbé to the Propaganda, 1689, *ibid.*, p. 248.

slanders, or frightening rumours that sometimes upset a whole community. One fascinating example comes from 1684–85 when Elizabeth ‘Ba Cai Dich’, a wealthy Japanese widow and fanatical partisan of d’Acosta in Faifo, reacted to his removal by Rome by unleashing a torrent of invective in Noguette’s church, castigating the French and the cardinals for their injustice to the Jesuits. To this abuse, she shrewdly added slanders about Noguette that resonated intriguingly in local minds: he was a married man who had left his wife; he was a military deserter (‘linh tlon’ or *linh trón* in modern spelling); he had fled to the east to escape a death sentence in France. This extraordinary state of affairs continued for over a year before Labbé abruptly halted it by physically removing her from the church. All this time the congregation had done nothing overt to support Noguette. Perhaps at first they had been mindful of Christian forbearance or, more likely, of Elizabeth’s high connections at court; but, as time passed, it seems to me that the absence of any Divine retribution might have added substance to Elizabeth’s words in their eyes. Whatever the case, ‘in a short time these speeches were spreading throughout several provinces and our Christians, as credulous and as great talkers as you know them to be, made glosses on them, each in his own fashion’.<sup>69</sup> The spreading sensation belatedly alerted Labbé to the danger Elizabeth posed for Christian obedience to the MEP. Left unchecked, she would have encouraged ‘all the bad Christians [to] take the opportunity to persecute us and to stop us from carrying out our functions when, for some just cause, we have denied them the sacraments’, he later explained.

Ejecting Elizabeth in mid-tirade, however, did not end the affair. She responded by officially charging Labbé with assault. While the local Vietnamese magistrate ultimately found in his favour, it was only after the missionaries had to endure a humiliating lecture from a pagan official on ‘the mutual charity and unity [they] ought to have with all the Christians’. Elizabeth also reported the incident to MEP enemies in Macao and China, who then forced Labbé to formally justify his conduct towards her.<sup>70</sup>

Jesuits also understood and exploited local cultural logic with brilliant effect. For instance, they called themselves ‘thầy Duc Chua Jesu, that is to say, Fathers of Jesus Christ, eminent and influential Fathers’.<sup>71</sup> In a society which normally attributed higher status and prestige to elder over younger, this title cleverly allowed Jesuits to assert hierarchical superiority over all other missionaries, on the argument that all the orders had founders and the Jesuit founder was Jesus (*Đức Chúa Jêsu*), ‘with St. Ignatius only being the First among them’.<sup>72</sup> This approach also quietly subverted French assertions of papal superiority without ever attacking them directly; by designating Saint Peter as the founder of the secular clergy, it automatically made secular apostolic missionaries seem junior to Jesuits in Vietnamese eyes. Finally, local Jesuits also advanced the

69 Anonymous, n.d. (in pencil ‘1687’), *ibid.*, pp. 11–23, quote, p. 23.

70 Ausiès to Laneau, 16 Mar. 1686, *ibid.*, pp. 107–9, quotes, p. 108.

71 Mahot to the Propaganda, July 1675, AMEP vol. 734, p. 87.

72 *Ibid.*, p. 89. Elizabeth used this argument in 1683, when Mahot refused to officiate at her daughter’s wedding until Elizabeth stopped confessing to d’Acosta because he said she knew his priestly power had been revoked; Anon., untitled and undated document (in pencil ‘1687’), AMEP vol. 736, pp. 116–17.



*padroado* position by shrewdly playing on the popular name for Christianity, ‘đạo hoà lan’, the Portuguese religion.<sup>73</sup> So damaging did this usage appear to the newcomers’ cause that in 1674, in an audience with Chúa Hiền, Mahot rather disingenuously denied that his religion, the Religion of the Lord of Heaven (*đạo chúa trời*), was the same as the Portuguese Religion.<sup>74</sup> As Mahot explained to the Propaganda in 1675:<sup>75</sup>

In their circular letters they call the King of Portugal (*bua deao*)<sup>76</sup> – emperor of the religion; when they speak or write of our religion they say it is the religion of the Portuguese (*Deao hoalans*), and speaking of the Fathers who should preach the religion of God they call them (*thây hoalans*), Portuguese Fathers.

Given the large role of anti-Portuguese suspicion in generating the bloody 1660s persecution, this was a very dangerous tactic. But it was so effective among Christians that it persisted into the 1690s, despite strong French support for an alternative name, *đạo chúa trời*, the Religion of the Lord of Heaven, ironically the creation of an earlier Jesuit, the Frenchman Alexandre de Rhodes.<sup>77</sup> They never convinced the Nguyễn court, however, which still called Christianity the ‘Portuguese Religion’ in the 1698 edict of prohibition.<sup>78</sup>

The sort of reasoning discussed above made sense in local minds and it was impossible to eradicate in the absence of effective and continuing Catholic indoctrination.<sup>79</sup> In reality, the 70,000-strong Catholic community swarmed with superficially Christian converts, many of whom desired the benefits of the religion, as they understood them, without having to transform their lives in return. When a contest for Christian support broke out between Jesuit and French priests in the late 1680s, the mass of partly committed Christians to whom missionaries appealed were easily transformed from a congregation into a constituency, a group of people attracted by rewards, deterred by threats, but always willing to try something new on offer. It was a dangerous development.

### The 1690 prohibition of Christian practice

In spring 1687, Chúa Hiền, the longest reigning seventeenth-century Nguyễn ruler, died. His son ascended the throne as Chúa Nghĩa. In the early 1680s, as the second most influential prince, he had befriended the apostolic vicar, Laneau, during a pastoral visit to the mission and offered to send for him to live in Cochinchina should he ever take the throne.<sup>80</sup> He was also reportedly well disposed personally towards the

73 Later sources have sometimes confused this Vietnamese term with *hoa lang*, meaning Dutch, but in the seventeenth century, *hoà lan* only referred to Portugal, as Roland Jacques has shown in ‘Les locutions vietnamiennes anciennes “Hoa Lang” et “Hoa Lang Dao” (A propos des “Farang” et de la “Loi des Portugais”’, in *Les missionnaires portugais et les débuts de l’Église catholique au Viêt-nam*, vol. 2 (Reichstett, France: Định Hướng Tùng Thư, 2004), pp. 46–84.

74 ‘Relation des principaux choses’, 1675, AMEP vol. 734, p. 53.

75 Anon., untitled document (marked in pencil ‘1687’), AMEP vol. 736, p. 93.

76 In modern orthography, *vua đao*, literally ‘the king of the way’ (meaning religion).

77 For de Rhodes, refer to Phan, *Mission and catechesis*, pp. 136–7.

78 Tiền Biên, p. 154.

79 In 1689, Labbé was still explaining to local Christians that *bua đao*, the ‘king of the religion’, was Christ and not the king of Portugal. Copy, ‘En Cochinchine, 1689’, AMEP vol. 736, p. 525.

80 Anon., copy, ‘Affaires de Cochinchine’, 1689, *ibid.*, pp. 307–9.

French, all factors that created a widespread sense of religious security among MEP missionaries early in the reign.<sup>81</sup> In 1688, when the involvement of French troops in armed unrest in Siam saw Laneau and his entourage imprisoned for many months, Chúa Nghĩa had sent him supportive messages and gifts, a gesture he repeated in 1689.<sup>82</sup> As the popular Hué medical missionary, Pierre Langlois, reported that same year, the new king was ‘as favourable towards Our Blessed Religion and towards the workers in the Lord’s vineyard as his ancestors were opposed to them’.<sup>83</sup> In short, nothing in Chúa Nghĩa’s character, interests, or previous behaviour suggested he would ban the public exercise of Christianity a mere 12 months later. Yet by demanding Macao return the Jesuit Barthelemy d’Acosta, his former physician, the sympathetic new ruler unwittingly set in train a series of events that led directly to that outcome.

The 1688 Macao trading ship brought with it a supposedly unwilling d’Acosta<sup>84</sup> to Faifo, and internecine feuding rekindled soon after. MEP sources reported that the Macao party blustered about removing the French by force, while Elizabeth and the dwindling band of Faifo Japanese spread deceptive rumours that amplified the shock. Many local Christians believed it all. As the French were on a pastoral tour upcountry at the time, waverers and those ‘with little affection for the truth and who had begun to understand what the religion was’, as Labbé shrewdly recognised, flocked to the Faifo Jesuit church. There they were administered by Dominique da Sylva, a Goan cleric from the ship whom d’Acosta introduced as the rightful Grand Vicar of Cochinchina.<sup>85</sup> But if undiluted French control had given some nominal Christians reason for second thoughts about the religion, as Labbé implies, the MEP had also used the Jesuit absence to train several new young catechists in towns like Faifo. Not only could they out-debate local literati, citing classical Chinese texts with aplomb, but they could defeat Jesuit partisans as well, Labbé enthused. Whatever ruse the Jesuit faction used to legitimate their Grand Vicar, his young Faifo catechists still ‘turned it all upside down’.<sup>86</sup> But it was a small victory. Father Barthelemy proved as popular as ever with women, and when he visited Hué, ‘the Ladies of the court, even the oldest and the most devout, felt no scruples at quitting [MEP] churches ... to receive Holy Communion’ from the Jesuit. Unfortunately, d’Acosta’s trip to the capital coincided with Chúa Hiên’s funerary rites, which had attracted people (including many Christians) from all over the country. Jesuit partisans took the opportunity to impart their version of recent events to these visiting Christians who spread it everywhere within weeks. Months of tension followed.<sup>87</sup>

81 For instance, refer to Noguette to Gesseard, 22 Jan. 1689, *ibid.*, p. 158.

82 Anon., copy, ‘Affaires de Cochinchine’, 1689, *ibid.*, pp. 307–9.

83 Labbé to Laneau, Feb. 1689, MEP vol. 736, pp. 267–9. Quote from Langlois to Laneau, 1 Feb. 1689, AMEP vol. 736, p. 174.

84 A contemporary document to this effect is cited in Manguin, *Portugais sur les côtes*, p. 212. As a priest under papal excommunication, and recalled to Rome, prudence would have dictated a public show of reluctance, whatever d’Acosta’s real feelings. The Jesuit’s swift resumption of priestly functions in Cochinchina, while still under this ban, does suggest any initial unwillingness soon passed, spurred on perhaps by the warm welcome of local Christians and hardline French attitudes.

85 Noguette to unknown, 5 Aug. 1688, AMEP vol. 736, pp. 137–8; Noguette to Laneau, 21 Jan. 1689, *ibid.*, pp. 149–52; Labbé to the Propaganda, Feb 1689, *ibid.*, pp. 227–33, quote p. 233.

86 Labbé to the Propaganda, Feb 1689, *ibid.*, p. 235.

87 *Ibid.*, pp. 236–9; quote, pp. 236–7.

When the Macao ship left, the MEP reported d'Acosta openly resumed full missionary functions without his papal ban on such activities being lifted. In October, citing da Sylva's *padroado* rights, he challenged Labbé's authority by unilaterally establishing a new religious confraternity. Dazzling lies, including that 'the Pope and all the kings of Europe' belonged to the same confraternity and that Mary so loved its members that she transported their souls directly to paradise at death, seduced many. Enchanted at the prospect, 'the most enlightened Christians and even those who call [ed] themselves our best friends' rushed to join. Pro-vicar Marin Labbé hit back hard. If he did not do everything possible to keep their souls pure he risked his own salvation, he grimly informed local Christians, before turning his fire on the foe: by setting up the confraternity when stripped of his priestly powers, d'Acosta had 'scorned the authority of the Sovereign Pontiff and made himself a rebel against J[esus] C[hrist]'; all who joined the group had 'separate[d] themselves from the flock of J.C, [and] lost the position of Children of God, and were self-declared enemies of the Holy Church'; any who persisted in it would be refused absolution as 'unworthy of the grace of God, and of all the possessions he has prepared for you in the blessed hereafter'. Such was Labbé's resolve that he even resorted to the highly questionable tactic of appealing to the (probably widespread) belief among poorly instructed Christians in the substantial nature of the afterlife and the possessions they would enjoy there.<sup>88</sup>

Outraged, d'Acosta's friends responded by denouncing apostolic vicar Laneau and his French missionaries to the court as the real authors of the recent troubles in Siam, and as plotting the same in Cochinchina, in league with the Nguyễn's Tonkinese enemies. This was the first of three virulent anti-MEP denunciations at court in 1688–1689, joining a long list of anti-French allegations raised there by Jesuit contacts since 1665. Chúa Nghĩa ignored the substance, which he believed to be false, and wondered instead why men sharing the same religion could not agree with each other.<sup>89</sup> The same question agitated many ordinary Christians, too: 'not knowing who to believe and not daring to blame any particular missionary, [they complained] against all in general that we are not united and at peace with each other', Ausiès recalled.<sup>90</sup> Even as frightened Hué Catholics scrambled to quit d'Acosta's confraternity, they nevertheless muttered resentfully that: '[the French] do not want peace nor any accommodation, that to join a confraternity of the Holy Virgin, no matter how well or poorly founded, there is no great sin there, so as to refuse confession to those who joined'.<sup>91</sup>

Taking his stand on the continued legality of the *padroado*, d'Acosta defended himself vigorously to the Christian community by rehearsing the rights of the Portuguese king and insisting that his own previous powers all persisted, despite the accusations of the French. In Hué, 'two captains, Christians but impious and polygamous, published [d'Acosta's defence] in all the churches ... saying all kinds of impertinences about our Holy Father the Pope and the Cardinals, scorning the saints of Europe whose feasts we celebrate', Langlois reported. They also threatened Labbé with violence and pressured the Christians to side with the Jesuit faction. The exasperated

88 Ibid., pp. 239–42; quotes, pp. 240–1.

89 Langlois to Laneau, 1 Feb. 1689, *ibid.*, pp. 173–5.

90 Ausiès to Le Grand, 15 July 1690, *ibid.*, p. 357.

91 Langlois to Laneau, 1 Feb. 1689, *ibid.*, p. 177.

pro-vicar later tried to make the Propaganda in far-off Rome understand the French predicament in Cochinchina:<sup>92</sup>

On arrival [d'Acosta] says he has no power and declares [he does] not want to do anything; and when he is established he protests that he has all his powers and wants to do more than all the missionaries ... If we go on a [pastoral] visit to the Christians they say we have taken flight. If we stay in the house they load us with opprobrium and calumnies; they cause us endless alarms [but] if we stay silent they tell the Christians we have submitted and that at last we are obeying [them] ... [Yet when we] make it known to the Christians that they have no [ecclesiastical] power, they accuse us to the King and blacken our blessed bishops with calumnies so odious that the sole suspicion [of them] is capable of bringing all the Kings of the east to exterminate the religion forever from their kingdoms.

That winter, as resentments festered, the MEP's great mandarinal protector died.<sup>93</sup> Then in spring 1689, the Macao ship brought another Jesuit, Nicolas Fonseca. This time few chastened local Christians welcomed him. Catholic leaders in Hué deliberated for a week over Fonseca's inducements, threats and claims to jurisdiction before finally barring their wives from confessing to him.<sup>94</sup> But then, at this delicate moment and without warning, four new Vietnamese priests from Siam suddenly blundered into this tense but manageable situation and wrecked it. Their arrival spurred another Jesuit denunciation at court, more serious this time because their original unauthorised departure for Siam as youngsters was a capital offence in Cochinchina. Perhaps even more damaging, however, was the disconcerting manner in which the men apparently behaved, seemingly acting as if Cochinchina enjoyed full religious freedom and as if completely unaware of the high stakes involved in their confreres' duel with the Jesuits.

The actions of Father Laurent Manuel in Dinh Cát, a sensitive northern military zone, seemed particularly indiscreet. Disobeying both Laneau and Labbé, he either ordered or allowed his flock to build him an impressive church and dwelling, then flaunted Christian numbers publicly by inviting them to a huge feast. Having acquired a horse, he then repeatedly antagonised the provincial magistrate by failing to pay him the common courtesy of dismounting when passing before his court, behaviour that earned the priest a large fine at the same time that it made a serious enemy whose voice would soon be loudest in Hué supporting the ban on Christianity. Most sensationally, however, Father Laurent Manuel buried Christians before mixed groups of Buddhist and Christian mourners, exposing the corpses and thundering that if 'princes and Kings, great Lords and Magistrates ... did not ... die in [God's] Grace' their souls

92 All quotes, Labbé to the Propaganda, Feb. 1689, *ibid.*, pp. 248–9.

93 Only ever referred to in MEP sources as '*ong pho ma*' (a title indicating the husband of a princess), this long-serving minister for shipping and foreigners in the 1670s and 1680s Nguyễn court was a great friend of Vachet in the early 1680s, and often very helpful to the MEP. (Refer to Launay, *Mission de Cochinchine*, vol. 1, pp. 139–42, 177–80, 209, 228, 242.) Missionary sources say he was the brother-in-law of Chúa Hiền's two sons by his main wife, making him the husband of Chúa Hiền's only daughter by this wife, Ngọc Tào. Refer to *Đại Nam liệt truyện tiền biên* [Arranged biographies of imperial Vietnam, early period], trans. Vương Hồng (Huế: Thuận Hoá, 1993), pp. 23–4, 41–2, 68.

94 Labbé, copy, 'En Cochinchine 1689', AMEP vol. 736, pp. 517–18.

would burn for eternity. Shocked Buddhists informed the already offended magistrate, piling outrage on insult.<sup>95</sup>

While passions stirred in the north, the other new Vietnamese priests spent several months in Hué, openly socialising with Jesuit partisans and those considered ‘bad’ Christians by the French while ignoring their confreres’ orders and advice. In Faifo, Elizabeth indulged her invective as a *thầy nữ* (female priest), preaching from Father Barthelemy’s own pulpit and creating continual tumult. In this heated environment, a mob of Jesuit partisans – ‘black Portuguese’ from the Macao ship, Japanese Christians and some Chinese – confronted Labbé and Noguette in the French mission compound to press the rights of the king of Portugal, only to be out-debated as the pro-vicar expounded the spiritual authority of the pope, cardinals and bishops, in Portuguese and Vietnamese, before the thronging crowd. The surly crowd retreated but returned some hours later seeking to kidnap Labbé ‘at Father Nicolas’ order’, or so Labbé claimed. The resulting brawl soon disrupted the whole quarter and brought an official investigation, dismaying the French who feared the king would hear of it.<sup>96</sup>

So disturbed were most Christians by this attack on the apostolic missionaries in Faifo that they shunned the Jesuit churches. Seeking to regain lost ground, from October 1689 d’Acosta and Fonseca began staging parties, comedies and games of skill and chance at their churches, things common enough in Macao but anathema to the reformist French. ‘The novelty of these things drew ... a huge of gentiles of all ages, both sexes, and every condition’,<sup>97</sup> Labbé reported, as well as many curious Christians. At some point, the revelry got out of hand and the plays became political dynamite. If popular comedies (*hát bôì*) in Nguyễn Cochinchina always allowed for sexual licentiousness, as much among the audience as on stage,<sup>98</sup> those at Father Barthelemy’s church reportedly trespassed beyond this into sensitive political, religious and cultural grounds. In the 1680s, according to Jean de Courtaulin’s accounts, local society had often buzzed with rumours and scandals concerning the sexual improprieties of Buddhist monks with nuns (or with other devout women who came to live near the pagodas), as exposed by the resulting pregnancies.<sup>99</sup> In one famous 1682 case, de Courtaulin reported that ‘one of the main monks’ had persuaded the daughter of a very senior official to become a nun, but the young woman had become pregnant not long after, to the scandal of the court. The monk continued his relationship with her in secret, however, and a year later, convinced her, her mother, brother and a number of soldiers to flee to Tonkin, with a large amount of her father’s money. At much the same time, another senior monk had been reportedly discovered in such sexually compromising circumstances by the son of the heir apparent that Chúa Hiền had commanded the man be executed on the spot, after which a large number of monks

95 Refer to Labbé to Laneau, 25 Mar. 1690, AMEP vol. 736, pp. 337–52 for their activities generally, with Father Laurent Manuel at pp. 341–2, quote, p. 342. This extract is in Launay, *Mission de Cochinchine*, pp. 356–7, where he is called Manuel. Also see Labbé, copy, ‘En Cochinchine 1689’, *ibid.*, pp. 518–24.

96 For Elizabeth, refer to Ausiès to Le Grand, 15 July 1690, *ibid.*, p. 357. For the attempted kidnap and consequences, refer to Labbé, copy, ‘En Cochinchine 1689’, *ibid.*, pp. 524–30.

97 Labbé to Maigrot, 26 July 1690, *ibid.*, p. 405.

98 For more details, refer to De Flory to Maigrot, 2 July 1729, AMEP vol. 739, p. 721.

99 See, for instance, de Cappony, 8 Dec. 1701, AMEP vol. 728, p. 184.

were conscripted into the army or sent to carry out public works.<sup>100</sup> So entrenched was the local belief in the impossibility of clerical celibacy that in 1674 Guillaume Mahot reported an official had been amazed to learn the Frenchman had no wife or child: he was ‘astonished to see priests who do not marry, they do not allow themselves to conceive of this’.<sup>101</sup>

But if monks and nuns in general were fair game for ribald commentary in late 1680s *hát bội*, MEP reports allege something far more serious about the Jesuit comedies. Their participants apparently made a coarse sexual reference to Buddhist nuns in a manner that was directly insulting to the queen mother, who had become the kingdom’s chief nun on her husband’s death. Furthermore, they bandied about the prohibited names of the king and other royal persons, a deliberately sacrilegious act given the universal cultural taboo against it in Han (and thus Vietnamese) civilisation. Finally, they had mocked monarchy itself, by ridiculing a leprous king who lost his throne. Worse was to follow, however. Certain MEP Christians near Hué, whose chronically ill French pastor had not visited them for two years, began to imitate the Jesuit congregations and stage daring *hát bội* in their own churches. With a new but equally inflammatory twist, they directly assailed the religion of court and country by physically attacking Buddha images. Ridiculing ‘the Idol of the country, sometimes they hit its head with a hammer, sometimes they cut off its nose and hands, and on some occasions they kicked it on the ground with their feet’,<sup>102</sup> the last being a mortal insult.

Such iconoclasm is rarely recorded in the MEP archives. So far I have found only one other instance of it, in 1681, when a fervent young convert accompanying de Courtaulin on a pastoral visit to Vietnamese Christians in neighbouring Champa had entered a new pagoda and broken off the head of its Buddha image. He then smashed it in de Courtaulin’s presence, making the missionary ‘very angry at that, for if it was known it could have excited a persecution’. As it was, the local villagers were so incensed at the monk’s failure to protect the idol that they put him in the cangue as a punishment.<sup>103</sup> Nevertheless, other incidents of Christians smashing Buddhist idols might well have occurred – or the events of 1689 proved unforgettable – since an

100 For both incidents, refer to Jean de Courtaulin, ‘Cochinchine: Relation depuis 1678 jusqu’en 1682’, *ibid.*, p. 22. For the sexual impropriety popularly associated with monasteries at this time, also refer to de Cappony’s 1701 comment: ‘the sister of the King and others of the highest quality have also given rise to scandal: these great ladies, who could chastely remarry some mandarin in place of their husbands, we see or know of these ladies who go to the pagodas to live near the *talapoins*, the majority [*la plus part*] become pregnant’ [J.-B. de Cappony, 8 Dec. 1701, *ibid.*, p. 184]. Despite MEP sensitivity to sexual issues, and thus possible unconscious overstatements in regard to such matters, too much evidence is scattered in archival documents to be able mainly to attribute such reports to overscrupulous French moral sensitivities or the unconscious projection of repressed sexuality. Refer to Nola Cooke, ‘Women, gender, and sexuality in 17<sup>th</sup> century Nguyễn Cochinchina: New light from old sources’, 4<sup>th</sup> International Convention of Asia Scholars, 20–24 Aug. Shanghai, 2005.

101 Mahot, ‘Relation des principaux choses’, MEP vol. 734, p. 46.

102 Details are from Langlois to unknown, 25 Feb. 1690, AMEP vol. 736, pp. 325–7; Ausiès to Le Grand, 15 July 1690, *ibid.*, pp. 359–60; Labbé to MEP Directors, 26 July 1690, *ibid.*, pp. 79–83; Labbé, ‘En Cochinchine 1689’, *ibid.*, p. 531; Noguette to Laneau, n.d. (in pencil ‘1691’), *ibid.*, p. 575 and Labbé to Laneau, 5 Feb. 1691, *ibid.*, pp. 606–9, 613–15.

103 Jean de Courtaulin, ‘Cochinchine: Relation depuis 1678 jusqu’en 1682’, AMEP vol. 728, p. 20.

accusation to that effect would become the stated reason for the 1698 outlawing of Christianity, although that particular accusation was reportedly later proven to be false.<sup>104</sup>

Such Christian attacks on Buddhist images were not simply culturally offensive but also politically highly charged, especially in the 1690s. As Li Tana has argued, by that time Buddhism was playing an important political role in Cochinchina by helping to shore up Nguyễn power in what was, relatively speaking, a new Vietnamese land. As the seventeenth century went on, and military success facilitated *de facto* secession from the north, the Cochinchinese ruling elite needed to find an ideological basis to legitimise their new state. Mahayana Buddhism increasingly came to fill that role: it was a perfect foil to the Neo-Confucian foundation of the Tonkinese state, while its syncretic nature allowed all sorts of local spirits to be venerated in its pagodas.<sup>105</sup> In the late 1670s or early 1680s, the heir apparent, prince Diễm,<sup>106</sup> had sent envoys to China ‘to seek statues and to bring back bonzes [monks] at enormous cost [and then had] a lot of temples built in the provinces’, de Courtaulin reported, although the missionary attributed this activity to the prince’s infatuation with a new concubine who was a Buddhist devotee rather than to any court policy favouring Buddhism.<sup>107</sup> If Buddhism was patronised as a matter of policy, it did not follow that individual rulers might not also be very committed to the religion: that was certainly true in regard to Chúa Nghĩa’s son and successor, who took the royal title of Minh Vương (r. 1691–1725). In the mid-1690s, he continued the family tradition by inviting a southern Chinese monk, Dashan, to the kingdom and even accepted initiation at his hands, along with the entire court, into the Lâm Tế school of Buddhism.<sup>108</sup> Although Dashan did not finally arrive until 1695, Chúa Nghĩa had also invited him during his brief reign,<sup>109</sup> perhaps indicating an interest on his part in seeking to reform 1680s monastic life and practices.

These iconoclastic local Christians were therefore playing with fire in 1689, as the longest-serving Vietnamese priest, Father Manuel, and various leading Christian laymen urgently but fruitlessly warned. But neither their community leaders nor the seven MEP priests in Huế at the time<sup>110</sup> proved able to restrain their actions. It is impossible to say from the extant sources I have seen why these Christians embarked on such a perilous path, but it does seem possible to me that the arrival of the four new Vietnamese priests might have had something to do with it. All had been raised in the MEP’s Siam seminary after being smuggled out of Cochinchina as children, and thus had little local experience to temper their evangelical zeal. It may be that their presence

104 Refer to de Cappony to unknown, 6 July 1698, AMEP vol. 738, p. 235; Langlois to Labbé and Noguette, 1 Aug. 1698, *ibid.*, p. 239.

105 Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1998), pp. 102–4.

106 He is called ‘the first prince’ in MEP sources. Diễm’s death in 1684 opened the way for the succession of Chúa Nghĩa, his half-brother. For his biography and that of his sons who tried to overthrow Chúa Nghĩa’s son in 1694, refer to *Liệt Truyện Tiên Biên*, vol. 1, pp. 41–2, 201.

107 Jean de Courtaulin, ‘Relation de la Cochinchine depuis l’an 1674 au mois de Juin en l’an 1682 au mois de Septembre 1683’, AMEP vol. 735, p. 128.

108 Li, *Nguyễn Cochinchina*, pp. 108–9.

109 Refer to Dashan’s short biography in *Liệt Truyện*, vol. 1, pp. 193–5.

110 They were Langlois, de Cappony and Father Manuel, plus the new Cochinchinese priests Fathers Laurent Manuel, Mauro, Thadée and François. Refer to Labbé, copy, ‘En Cochinchine 1689’, AMEP vol. 736, p. 531.

sparked an incendiary outburst of religious fervour among rural Christians whose sick French pastor had neglected them for two years. Whatever the case, it does seem that by late 1689 emotions and events were spiralling dangerously out of hand in certain Cochinchinese Christian circles.

Many scandalised onlookers, among them senior court ladies, had earlier denounced the Jesuit congregation's sordid insults to a deeply offended king. Now news of the provocative behaviour of certain MEP Christians further outraged the Nguyễn court. No early modern Vietnamese state would ever have allowed such wild behaviour to pass unchecked, irrespective of the ruler's personal sympathies. As a result, the Christian community saw years of effective religious toleration sacrificed in as many weeks, as moral indignation at court was matched by a popular revulsion against Christianity and Christians. Before these astonishing events, believers and churches were reportedly 'multiplying not only without contradiction or opposition from the gentiles but even with their agreement and applause';<sup>111</sup> now the display of 'insolence, incivility, and the wicked lives of the Christians' had created a 'terrible aversion for the religion'. The queen mother herself, rumour asserted, begged her son to ban the faith because of 'the confusion and disorder that the Christian religion produced in his estates'.<sup>112</sup>

In February 1690, Chúa Nghĩ acceded to court opinion and published a ban on the future practice of Christianity. The only references to this document are in MEP sources, which interestingly recorded that the same decree also prohibited gambling and cock fighting. While the edict never explained why the religion was banned, in the circumstances of the time this bracketing of Christianity with two highly popular pastimes that easily degenerated into wasteful rowdyism strongly suggests that it was now regarded by the court in a similar way, as a dubious form of popular behaviour whose potential to disrupt public order warranted official control. Had there been any direct political motive for the ban, if, for instance, assiduous Jesuit assertions that it was caused by French involvement in the 1688 political unrest in Siam had been true, Chúa Nghĩ would inevitably have ordered a mass apostasy and bloody cleansing of fervent Christian ranks, as routinely occurred in every other Nguyễn repression of Christianity from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. In every other case but the 1690 prohibition, the fundamental issue for Nguyễn rulers was, ultimately, a subject's obedience to the throne: from the very first martyr in 1644 until 1862, Nguyễn rulers executed Christians principally 'in order to teach everyone the obedience they owed the king'.<sup>113</sup> But instead of pursuing Christians as potential political dissidents in 1690, Chúa Nghĩ ordered they be untroubled on account of past religious adherence and the missionaries left untouched. Although some minor unauthorised persecutions did occur in the provinces, the court actually punished a number of perpetrators for

111 Noguette to Laneau, 13 Jan. 1691, *ibid.*, p. 577.

112 Labbé to Maigrot, 26 July 1690, *ibid.*, p. 406, but her servant denied it, according to Langlois to Labbé, 14 Feb. 1690, *ibid.*, p. 318.

113 De Rhodes, *Rhodes of Vietnam*, p. 130, quoting the 1644 governor of Quảng Nam. For more on this point, refer to Nola Cooke, 'Expectations and transactions: Local responses to Catholicism in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Nguyễn Cochinchina (Đàng Trong)', 18<sup>th</sup> conference of the International Association of Historians of Asia, Taipei, 6–10 Dec. 2004.



exceeding royal orders.<sup>114</sup> In every respect, therefore, the 1690 prohibition on Christian practice was a unique event in Nguyễn (and Vietnamese) religious history.

### **Afterword: The Clash of global and local in 1680s Cochinchina**

From the mid-nineteenth century until quite recently, the story of Catholicism in Vietnam has been the plaything of clashing ideologies and partisan political adherents. The direct link between the mass killing and dispossession of local Christians in the later 1850s and the Franco-Spanish invasion of 1858 that began the colonisation of the country so polemicalised Vietnamese Catholicism as a historical phenomenon that most accounts of its pre-colonial past became little more than caricature. The actual human beings involved, whether foreign missionaries or Vietnamese Christians, vanished under the weight of nineteenth- and twentieth-century passions projected backwards onto them. Much ink was spilt by authors keen to prove that these people had always been imperialist fifth columnists working to help foreigners take over the country or, conversely, nothing more than the innocent victims of pagan barbarity. Mythologised, dehumanised and emptied of context, nuance and complexity, the early history of Vietnamese Catholicism was sacrificed on a number of altars, including in particular a stubborn western desire to make its story one in which missionaries predominated. Even as late as the 1998 special Synod for Asia, documents issued by Rome blithely recycled the hoary old notion that Catholic history in Asia was largely a Eurocentric tale revolving around foreign missionaries. The Vietnamese bishops at the synod rightly rejected this outmoded view, arguing for the primacy of local believers in the history of Catholicism there. As Roland Jacques later reiterated, it was time that the role of missions and missionaries be placed ‘in a more just perspective, where the real [Vietnamese Catholic] protagonists are not forgotten’.<sup>115</sup>

Some years ago, when beginning the research upon which this essay is based, my broad aim was also to restore Vietnamese, and Vietnamese Catholics, to a central role in their own history. I hoped that a careful sifting of the unmediated accounts of men who had lived at the grass-roots for many years in later seventeenth-century Nguyễn Cochinchina would enable me to fill some of the gaps in our knowledge of this time and place, following the destruction of so much documentary evidence here during the long Vietnamese civil war of the later eighteenth century. When I came upon the story of Chúa Nghĩa’s unexpected 1690 ban on Christian practice in the MEP archives, it never occurred to me that the process of historicising and contextualising what was apparently a fascinating but otherwise insignificant event in Vietnamese Catholic history would ever reveal the interplay of such complex factors on the ground in later 1680s Cochinchina. What later analysis showed, however, was a genuine conjunction of events which required several layers of influences, actions and interests operating together, in a particular time and place, to produce this curious outcome. None of the necessary protagonists alone, or any one of the intersecting influences, would have been sufficient to cause the 1690 prohibition. Instead it required the strange alchemy of

114 Langlois to unknown, 25 Mar. 1690, AMEP vol. 736, pp. 326–7 and Noguette to Laneau, 13 Jan. 1691, *ibid.*, pp. 577–9.

115 Jacques, *Missionnaires portugais*, vol. 2, p. 28.

global, regional, local and personal issues, simmering to boiling point within the late 1680s Cochinchinese Christian community, to brew this unique result.

But beyond revealing a fascinating conjunction of historical forces at work, did the events outlined here, and the ensuing prohibition, really matter very much? No blood was shed in 1690 and very little property confiscated or destroyed. Missionaries still lived openly in Cochinchina and within a year were quietly going about their business once again. Despite a second, harsher edict in 1691 that levied a punitive tax on Christians caught practising their religion, churches began to fill up once more and Christian practice increasingly returned to what it had been previously in many places. So were the events of 1688–90 in reality little more than a footnote to Catholic Vietnamese history? That was certainly the position of the rare European accounts that mentioned these events; but the view from a wider historical angle shows these short years contained the seeds of changes that would help define Christian life in the Cochinchina mission until 1750, when all foreign missionaries were expelled and a violent persecution thinned Christian ranks. We conclude with a few brief comments on the consequences of these few fraught years, beginning with the impact on local Catholics.

Though no direct evidence links the events of these years to the 1698 prohibition of Christianity, or to Minh Vương's brutal 1700 persecution of believers, it seems very likely to me that the two were connected. Unlike any of the previous generation of Nguyễn princes, Minh Vương was always described in MEP sources as hostile towards Christianity in itself, an attitude that was surely either created or deeply informed by the excesses of late 1689. At his father's court, the teenage prince would have known of the insults offered by the Christian comedies to his religion and his family, in particular to his father's mother, just as he would have known all about the desecration and destruction of Buddha images in the churches near Huế. It therefore seems significant to me that it was a 1698 allegation of Catholic iconoclasm in a local village that triggered a new and harsher prohibition of Christianity at his hands. In 1689, Minh Vương had learned that Christians smashed Buddhist idols; in 1698, the new accusation might easily have seemed like more of the same, except that this time he was able to act on it. If the wild excesses of late 1689 did predispose Minh Vương to eradicate Christianity from his realm, then those few, frenzied months would cast a long shadow over the well-being of Cochinchinese Christians for decades into the future.

Where the MEP was concerned, no speculation is needed about the consequences of these years. Although not obvious at the time, in retrospect the 1680s represented the highpoint of French missionary influence in Cochinchina for nearly 100 years. In the late 1680s, just as their duel with the Jesuits was coming to a head, events outside the mission, and beyond its control, impacted disastrously on the MEP position in Cochinchina. First was a 1688 palace coup in Siam. French soldiers had been briefly involved in the subsequent fighting, and the MEP apostolic vicar of Cochinchina, who still resided in Siam at the mission college, had been imprisoned for some months. Jesuits in Europe pounced on this supposedly deplorable MEP involvement in local politics, blew it up out of all proportion, and publicised it widely to support their confreres' struggle in Asia against the apostolic vicars. So successful were they that the Cochinchina mission became a by-word for scandal. MEP patronage dried up and new

vocations waned. Almost immediately, funding issues began to undermine MEP missionaries everywhere, but nowhere were the consequences of this growing impoverishment as disastrous as in Cochinchina.

In 1689, the Propaganda had chosen Francisco Perez, a product of the MEP seminary in Siam, as the new apostolic vicar of Cochinchina. But when Perez finally arrived to live in the mission in 1691, Paris refused his requests for the pension his predecessors had enjoyed, on the ground that he was not a member of the MEP. The ensuing dispute over money estranged the new apostolic vicar from the French missionaries under his authority at the same time that it pushed him towards the Jesuits. Like d'Acosta and Fonseca, Perez was locally born and partly of Asian descent, the first and last such prelate in Cochinchina for centuries, and he had no real quarrel with Jesuits or other religious orders in the Iberian empires. In the early eighteenth century, with the MEP seminary in Paris unable to provide enough new missionaries, the apostolic vicar invited Spanish Franciscans from the Philippines into the mission. Thereafter all sorts of religious missionaries crowded in, one of whom, an Italian Barnabite, eventually became Perez's successor.

As symbolic of the MEP's decline in the early eighteenth century, a French missionary would not be reappointed to head the Cochinchina mission until the early 1740s. But by then the damage had been done to MEP interests. Religious missionaries had successfully forced the French from districts and churches they had pioneered, assigning them only a backwater area centred on modern Phú Yên, in south-central Vietnam, and Champa, along with a solitary church in Faifo. From the 1690s until the 1770s, when the Jesuits were dissolved and MEP missionary numbers began a gradual rise in Cochinchina, the Jesuits (and then other regular orders) emerged as the clear and comprehensive victors of the 1670s and 1680s duel with the reforming MEP, with results fraught with local consequence for Catholic history in eighteenth-century Cochinchina. Looking back over the pre-colonial era, with the MEP archives mostly closed to outside researchers, twentieth-century colonial and anti-colonial apologists alike often argued as if a straight line joined French missionaries in the seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth-century MEP priests whose understandable concerns for the physical survival of local Christians had helped stimulate the 1858 Franco-Spanish invasion of Vietnam. However, access to MEP archival documents now allows us to discard such artificial assemblages and helps us see the complexity of mission history, as in this Cochinchinese example, by revealing how contingent external influences could interact with regional or local factors to shape lived historical experiences in unique or at least unexpected ways.