

# The Contextualization of Catholic Theology in Vietnam: An Endeavor to Integrate Christian Faith within the Local Cultural and Religious Frameworks

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## Abstract

The article attempts to articulate the process of contextualization of Catholic theology in Vietnam from the early period to the end of the twentieth century. Through the efforts of both missionaries and Vietnamese theologians, contextual theology was established and attained certain results in the effort to integrate the Christian faith into the Vietnamese cultural and religious contexts. To make Catholicism harmonious with and integrate it into Vietnamese cultural and religious backgrounds, Vietnamese theologians even went further by endeavoring to build a contextual theology known as “Viet-theology”. In so doing, Catholic theologians contributed to effectively spreading their faith among Vietnamese people. Moreover, they help to build up religious tolerance in the context of multi-religious traditions like Vietnam.

**Keywords:** Contextual Theology, Culture, Religion, Vietnam, Catholicism.

## Abstrak

Artikel ini berupaya mengartikulasikan proses kontekstualisasi teologi Katolik di Vietnam dari periode awal hingga

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akhir abad kedua puluh. Melalui upaya para misionaris dan teolog Vietnam, teologi kontekstual terbentuk dan mencapai hasil tertentu dalam upaya mengintegrasikan iman Kristen ke dalam konteks budaya dan agama Vietnam. Untuk menyelaraskan dan memadukan Katolikisme dengan latar belakang budaya dan agama Vietnam, para teolog Vietnam bahkan melangkah lebih jauh dengan berupaya membangun teologi kontekstual yang dikenal sebagai “teologi Viet”. Dengan demikian, para teolog Katolik berkontribusi untuk menyebarkan iman mereka secara efektif di antara orang-orang Vietnam. Selain itu, mereka membantu membangun toleransi beragama dalam konteks tradisi multiagama seperti Vietnam.

**Kata Kunci:** Teologi Kontekstual, Budaya, Agama, Vietnam, Katolik.

## Introduction

Vietnam is a country with a great diversity of religious traditions, with an estimated 26.5 million religious followers.<sup>1</sup> Throughout its long history, Vietnam has been influenced by Chinese culture, which introduced religious traditions such as Confucianism and Taoism to Vietnamese people. Additionally, many Vietnamese have also become favorable toward Buddhism. Another segment of the Vietnamese population adheres to domestic religions, Christianity, and Islam, and many people practice folk beliefs. These religious traditions constitute fundamental features of Vietnamese culture.

Existing in such a religiously diverse context in Vietnam for over 400 years, Catholicism has experienced countless ups and downs. Vietnam, where Christian missionaries came to evangelize, was not “a wild forest” like certain African and American countries.<sup>2</sup> The missionaries, therefore, faced many challenges, including disputes with the local cultural entities and traditional religions of the Vietnamese people. Due to differing faith traditions, the Catholic

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<sup>1</sup> Duong Van Bien et al., “Engagement of Vietnamese Religious Communities in National Education: Resources, Challenges, and Opportunities,” in *Vietnamese Language, Education and Change In and Outside Vietnam*, ed. by Phan Le Ha et al., (Singapore: Springer, 2024), 261-284.

<sup>2</sup> Do Quang Chinh, *Dong Ten trong xa hoi Dai Viet 1615-1773/ The Jesuit order in the Society of Great Viet between 1615 and 1773*, (Hanoi: Religious Publishing House, 2008), 49.

Church and missionaries initially prohibited Vietnamese Christians from practicing their ancestor worship (*tho cung to tien*), one of the most important folk religious traditions of Vietnamese people, as well as other traditional spiritual practices. As a result, this prohibition entailed complex disputes between Vietnamese Catholics and followers of the traditional religions in Vietnam.

Nguyen Dinh Chieu, one of the Vietnamese Confucian poets in the nineteenth century, criticizes Catholics who did not practice ancestor worship in Vietnam: "*Tha dui ma giu dao nha, con hon co mat ong cha khong tho/ Willingly Being blind to continue sustaining the traditional religion is better than having bright eyes but not worshipping ancestors.*"<sup>3</sup> During the reign of Emperor Tu Duc of the Nguyen dynasty (1847-1883), Catholic laypeople in Vietnam were even referred to as "*duu dan*",<sup>4</sup> a term likening Catholics to harmful weeds that needed to be removed from a rice field. At that time, Catholicism was condemned as "*ta dao*", implying that this religion was considered a sort of heresy. To disseminate the Christian faith and foster religious tolerance alongside the local religions and traditional culture of Vietnam, how have the missionaries, followed by Vietnamese Catholic theologians and the Catholic Church in Vietnam, navigated this challenge?

In addressing the above inquiry, several studies touched upon certain aspects. For instance, Peter C. Phan (1998),<sup>5</sup> a Vietnamese American scholar and theologian, focused on the role of Alexandre de Rhodes in promoting inculturation in seventeenth-century Vietnam. Phan revisited the case of De Rhodes in an article in 2000.<sup>6</sup> In another work published in 2003, Phan placed the approach

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<sup>3</sup> Dang Van Tuan, "Nguyen Dinh Chieu – Nhung anh huong van hoa trong doi song xa hoi Nam Bo/ Nguyen Dinh Chieu – His influences on culture in the social life in Southern region of Vietnam", *Tap chi Khoa hoc Xa hoi*, Issue 7 (287), (2022), 29-37.

<sup>4</sup> Quoc Su Quan Trieu Nguyen, *Dai Nam thuc luc chinh bien, tap 33/ Veritable Records of the Great South*, (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1975), Volume 33, 122.

<sup>5</sup> Phan PC, *Mission and Catechesis: Alexandre de Rhodes and Inculturation in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Phan PC, "Doing Theology in the Context of Mission Lessons from Alexandre de Rhodes, S.J.", *Gregorianum*, Volume. 81, No. 4, (2000), 723-749.

of De Rhodes to contextual theology within the broader context of Catholic proselytization in Asia.<sup>7</sup> In addition to Peter C. Phan, many Vietnamese scholars have examined the perspectives of Catholic missionaries on local cultural and religious entities in Vietnam. Among them, Nguyen Hong Duong had significant research. In a research in 1999, he paid attention to the opposition of Alexandre de Rhodes to the folk religious beliefs of the Vietnamese people. Rather than emphasizing the efforts of missionaries to contextualize Catholic theology within the frameworks of local culture and beliefs, Nguyen Hong Duong argued that the process of Catholic inculturation was largely driven by the religious practices of lay believers.<sup>8</sup>

Other studies started to directly address the topic of theology and traditional religions in Vietnam. For instance, Peter Tuyen Nguyen with the thesis “*A Theological and Cultural Foundation for Veneration of Ancestors among Vietnamese Catholics and its Liturgical Implications*” in 2007,<sup>9</sup> Anh Q. Tran with a profound book entitled “*Gods, heroes, and Ancestors: An Interreligious Encounter in eighteenth-century Vietnam Errors of the Three Religions*” published in 2018,<sup>10</sup> and others.

As seen, a large part of the existing scholarship focuses on the case of Alexandre de Rhodes. Another segment examines the issue of inculturation in Christian religious practices, rather than the development of theological frameworks like contextual theology. The rest group of studies began to highlight the theological efforts of missionaries to create a contextual theology in Vietnam before the nineteenth century. While highlighting the results of the scholarship as such, my article attempts to further explore the significant efforts made by both missionaries and Vietnamese theologians in

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<sup>7</sup> Phan PC, *In Our Own Tongues Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Nguyen Hong Duong, “Buoc duong hoi nhap Van hoa Dan toc cua Cong giao Viet Nam/ The Process of national inculturation of Vietnamese Catholicism”, *Nghien cuu Ton giao*, No. 1, (1999), 54-60.

<sup>9</sup> Nguyen PT, “A Theological and Cultural Foundation for Veneration of Ancestors among Vietnamese Catholics and its Liturgical Implications”, *Master Thesis*, (Ontario: McMaster Divinity College, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Tran A, *Gods, heroes, and ancestors: An interreligious encounter in eighteenth century Vietnam Errors of the Three Religions*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

developing a contextual theology of Catholicism in Vietnam—one of the most important avenues for the expansion of Catholicism in the country. The objectives of this article, therefore, not only center on the efforts of early missionaries like Alexandre de Rhodes but also consider the work of certain Vietnamese theologians and the Catholic Church in Vietnam up until the late twentieth century.

### Contextual Theology

To analyze the process of contextualization of Catholic theology in Vietnam, first of all, it is necessary to define contextual theology. In this study, I employ the definition of contextual theology, which is suggested by Catholic theologian Stephen B. Bevans. In his famous book *Models of Contextual Theology*, Bevans considers contextual theology as “a way of doing theology in which one takes into account the spirit and message of the gospel; the tradition of the Church; the culture in which one is theologizing; and social change within that culture.”<sup>11</sup> According to Bevans, there are two things that contextual theology makes efforts to inquire seriously. They include: the experience of the past which is recorded in scripture and preserved and defended in tradition; and the experience of the present, which is context, comprising individual and social experience, secular or religious culture, social location, and social change.<sup>12</sup> Following this principle, Bevans suggests six models of contextual theology, including the Translation Model, the Anthropological Model, the Praxis Model, the Synthetic Model, and the Transcendental Model.<sup>13</sup>

Generally, the contextualization of Catholic theology is a process that integrates theological norms into specific contexts, seeking ways to express theological content through the lens of local frameworks. Since being published first in 1992, the aforementioned theological work of Bevans has led the field in the twenty-first century.<sup>14</sup> His models of contextual theology have been widely

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<sup>11</sup> Bevans S, *Models of Contextual Theology*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, XVI.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-110.

<sup>14</sup> Pears A, *Doing Contextual Theology*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 20.

applied by many studies, such as Paul S. Chung (2010),<sup>15</sup> Edward F. Tverdek (2011),<sup>16</sup> Benno van den Toren and Liz Hoare (2015),<sup>17</sup> Daniel Dei (2019),<sup>18</sup> Yohanes Damianus (2020),<sup>19</sup> and others. Each of these studies has employed one or more of Bevans' models of contextual theology in their work. For my research, I particularly utilize the Praxis Model and the Synthetic Model to illuminate the efforts of contextualization of Catholic theology in Vietnam. The Praxis Model posits that "one can develop a theology that is truly relevant to a particular context".<sup>20</sup> The Synthetic Model preserves "the integrity of the traditional message, while acknowledging the importance of taking culture and social change seriously".<sup>21</sup>

### Beginnings from the French Jesuit Missionary Alexandre de Rhodes

It may be said that the first efforts for building a contextual theology began with Alexandre de Rhodes (1593-1660).<sup>22</sup> Although

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<sup>15</sup> Chung PS, "Mission and Inculturation in the Thought of Matteo Ricci", in *Asian Contextual Theology for the Third Millennium Theology of Minjung in Fourth-Eye Formation*, ed., by Pauls. Chung, Kim Kyoung-Jae, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2010), 127-146.

<sup>16</sup> Tverdek EF, "Analytic Theology as Contextual Theology", *Australian eJournal of Theology* 18.3, (2011), 197-210.

<sup>17</sup> Van den Toren B & Hoare L, "Evangelicals and Contextual Theology: Lessons from Missiology for Theological Reflection", *Practical Theology*, 2 (8), (2015), 77-98.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel D, "An Integrated Approach to Theological Contextualization in Africa", *Currents in Theology and Mission* 46: 3 (July 2019)), 11-17.

<sup>19</sup> Damianus Y, "Dayak Tunjung Cosmology and the Theology of Communion Sanctorum An Exploration of Contextual Theology in Synthetic Model of Stephen B. Bevans", *International Journal of Indonesian Philosophy & Theology*, 1 (1), (2020), 41-53.

<sup>20</sup> Bevans S, *Models of Contextual Theology*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 67.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>22</sup> Alexandre de Rhodes, a French Jesuit missionary, arrived in Cochin China in 1627. In March 1627, he arrived at Cua Bang sea port (today it is Ba Lang, Thanh Hoa province, Vietnam) and named this place as the Giuse (Joseph) port. In March 1630, De Rhodes left Tokin, then he came back Cochin china and preached here during the period of 1640-1645. See De Rhodes A, *History of the Kingdom of Tonkin*, trans. Hong Nhue, (The Committee for Solidarity of Vietnamese Catholics in Ho Chi Minh city, 1994).

he was not the first missionary to arrive in what is now Vietnam, De Rhodes made significant contributions to the process of contextualizing Catholicism in Vietnam.

According to the research of Peter C. Phan, De Rhodes is often proclaimed the founder of Vietnamese Catholicism due to a series of his important contributions. "First, he carried out a highly successful mission in both parts of Vietnam, Tonkin, and Cochinchina. Second, besides two priceless memoirs on Vietnamese society in the seventeenth century and on the beginnings of Vietnamese Catholicism, he published the first books, including a dictionary and a catechism, in Vietnamese in the Romanized script. Third, he successfully lobbied for the establishment of a hierarchy in Vietnam. Thanks to his persistent efforts, in 1659 two bishops were appointed apostolic vicars of Tonkin and Cochinchina, respectively."<sup>23</sup>

Additionally, due to his efforts in missionary work, Alexandre de Rhodes became one of the most typical Jesuit missionaries who sought to contextualize Catholic theology in Vietnam. He translated Catholic theological terms into the vernacular Vietnamese. One of the most important terms is God translated into *Chua Deu* (Lord Deus) by the earliest missionaries in Vietnam. De Rhodes did not use both such a term and the way of translation as *t'ien chu* 天主 (The Lord of Heaven) of Matteo Ricci in China. In the work *History of the Kingdom of Tonkin*, De Rhodes announced the God under the Vietnamese name of *Duc Chua Troi Dat* (The Honorable Lord of Heaven and Earth).<sup>24</sup> In the catechism entitled *Phep Giang Tam Ngay/ Catechism Divided into Eight Days* compiled by himself, this name of God was also used approximately 100 times.<sup>25</sup> De Rhodes explained why he chose this word to refer to God. According to him, choosing the *Duc Chua Troi Dat* (The Honorable Lord of Heaven and

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<sup>23</sup> Phan PC, *In Our Own Tongues – Perspective from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis books, 2003), 156-157.

<sup>24</sup> De Rhodes A, *Lich su vuong quoc Dang Ngoai / History of the Kingdom of Tonkin*, trans. Hong Nhue, (Ho Chi Minh City: The Committee for Solidarity of Vietnamese Catholics, 1994), 83.

<sup>25</sup> Do Quang Chinh, *Dong Ten trong xa hoi Dai Viet 1615-1773/ The Jesuit order in the Society of Great Viet between 1615 an 1773*, (Hanoi: Religious Publishing House, 2008), 460.

Earth) followed the term used by the Apostle Saint Paul when he preached to the Athenians. In addition, selecting this name was appropriate to the popular beliefs of the Vietnamese people at that time, who also commonly referred to *Phat* or *But* (Buddha) as a deity in the same way they believed in the Lord of Heaven. This suggests that the Vietnamese people often worshipped their deity without fully understanding him. By employing the vernacular term of *Duc Chua Troi Dat*, De Rhodes was able to immediately persuade two indigenous people to convert to Catholicism.<sup>26</sup>

Not only rendered Catholic theological terms from Western culture into Vietnamese culture, but Alexandre de Rhodes also compiled a bilingual catechism *Phep Giang Tam Ngay/ Catechism Divided into Eight Days*, which was published in 1651.<sup>27</sup> This catechism was presented in a way that followed the same arrangement as the book entitled *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven 天主實義*, which was composed by Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) – one Jesuit missionary proselytized in China, also known as Li Madou (利瑪竇) in Chinese name. Like Matteo Ricci, Alexandre de Rhodes was a creative theologian when he contextualized the Gospel to integrate Christian messages into the local cultural and religious contexts. Alexandre de Rhodes drew on the characteristic of fidelity of Vietnamese Confucian culture to present the Catholic catechism, which firstly expressed the relationship between human beings and God as the Creator and the Father, and then gradually addressed the mystery of Christ's descent to Earth, redemption, and more.<sup>28</sup>

Especially, the famous Jesuit missionary Alexandre de Rhodes sought to present the catechism within the feudal Confucian society of Vietnam by highlighting the “three Superiors” whom people needed to respect such as the three fathers (*Tam Phu*) at that

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<sup>26</sup> The first Christian was named as Giuse (Joseph), the second was named as Inhaxu. See De Rhodes A, *Lich su vuong quoc Dang Ngoai/ History of the Kingdom of Tonkin*, trans. Hong Nhue, (Ho Chi Minh City: The Committee for Solidarity of Vietnamese Catholics, 1994), 83.

<sup>27</sup> This catechism was compiled in Latin and Vietnamese languages, published in Roma in 1651.

<sup>28</sup> Do Quang Chinh, *Dong Ten trong xa hoi Dai Viet 1615-1773/ The Jesuit order in the Society of Great Viet between 1615 and 1773*, (Hanoi: Religious Publishing House, 2008), 467.

time. In the catechism, he wrote: "Now, we have three superiors, called three fathers, whom we must respect. Below, there are our parents who bear our bodies. In the middle, some Kings and Lords rule the country. At the top, there is God who creates all things".<sup>29</sup>

The second contribution of Alexandre de Rhodes to establishing contextual theology was the development of the comparative method for missionary work. By analyzing the doctrines of non-Christian religions from the Christian perspective, he became one of the missionaries who differed from others in rejecting the errors of paganism. He recommended that "one should not attack the errors of non-Christian religions before establishing the truths knowable by the light of natural reason. The goal is to build in the hearers' minds a firm foundation on which the rest of their faith can be supported, and not to turn them off, which often happens by our rebutting and ridiculing their devotions, false though they are, and their superstitious observances".<sup>30</sup> De Rhodes, thus, was one of the first missionaries to highlight the necessity of the comparative method and interreligious dialogue in the context of various religions coexisting. Furthermore, following Ricci, De Rhodes sought to show that the Christian faith is harmonious with reason and the ancient wisdom of the Chinese and Vietnamese peoples.

After De Rhodes' request to promote the spread of the Christian faith in East Asia, the Holy See sent two bishops, Francois Pallu (1626-1684) and Lambert de la Motte (1624-1679), to Vietnam.<sup>31</sup> The Holy See instructed them to respect local cultures and customs and to avoid getting involved in political issues.<sup>32</sup> In contrast to these instructions, in subsequent times, the missionaries of the MEP (Paris

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<sup>29</sup> De Rhodes A, *Cathechismus pro iis, qui volunt suscipere Baptismum, in Octo dies divisus/ Phep giang tam ngay cho ke muon chiu phep rua toi ma vao dao thanh duc Chua troi*, (Roman: Ope Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide in lucem editus. Ab Alexandro de Rhodes è Societate Jesu, ejusdem-que Sacrae Congregationis Missionario Apostolico, 1651), 17.

<sup>30</sup> Phan PC, *In Our Own Tongues – Perspective from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis books, 2003), 166.

<sup>31</sup> Duong Van Bien, "The Global Catholic Missionary Societies and the Spread of Marian Devotion in Pre-Twentieth-Century Vietnam", *Manusya: Journal of Humanities*, No.1, (2024), 1-20.

<sup>32</sup> Tran Tam Tinh, *Thap Gia va Luoi Guom/ Cross and Sword*, (Ho Chi Minh city: Youth Publishing House, 1988), 18-19.

Foreign Missions Society) more or less imposed Western theological points when engaging with local religions and cultures. As a result, Catholics in Vietnam gradually became a strange community within the country. To this point, Father Tran Tam Tinh once described the Catholic community as “an isolated island” in Vietnam.<sup>33</sup>

More seriously, due to their involvement with politics, some foreign missionaries combined their religious goals with colonialism in Vietnam. The Catholic church of Vietnamese remained dependent on colonial powers for a long time and Vietnamese clergy were even underestimated by missionaries and foreign clergy.<sup>34</sup> Consequently, the contextualization of theology was not promoted until the Vietnamese bishops were able to take leadership of the Vietnamese Catholic Church and Vietnam became an entirely independent nation after 1975.

### The Viet-Theology Movement after the 1980 Pastoral Letter

The peaceful restoration and unification of the entire country on April 30, 1975, marked a new historical period for the Vietnamese nation. This event also ushered in a new era for the Vietnamese Catholic Church. For the first time, in 1980, the bishops in Vietnam, as the only Vietnamese, organized a national conference of bishops to address significant issues for the Catholic Church in Vietnam in the new era.

Besides affirming the Church’s commitment to the well-being of all humankind, the pastoral letter of that conference also expressed the Vietnamese Catholic church’s efforts to provide guidelines for developing theology, particularly ecclesiology, in Vietnam, aiming to integrate Catholicism into the national context. The letter called on the Catholic Church in Vietnam to adhere to three important principles as follows:

*Firstly*, the Church should go hand in hand with the nation and the country. The 1980 Pastoral Letter advocated that, as a Holy Church in the Vietnamese nation, the church must commit to accompanying the fate of the homeland, following the national

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>34</sup> This issue is analyzed deeply by Keith C, *Catholic Vietnam – a Church from Empire to Nation*, (University of California Press, 2012).

traditions, and integrating into the contemporary life of the country. Such a spirit of the letter adheres to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which states, "The Holy Church must accompany all of humankind and share earthly duties with the world" (MV 40,2).<sup>35</sup>

*Secondly*, Vietnamese Catholics unite with all compatriots to protect and build the motherland. The letter confirmed that the love for the nation among Vietnamese Catholics is not only a natural feeling but also a response to the call of the Gospel. According to the letter, the patriotism of Catholics should be expressed practically. This means that Catholics must consider the current issues of the homeland, understand the policies and laws of the Vietnamese State, and actively join with all compatriots to protect and build a strong, free, and happy Vietnam.<sup>36</sup>

*Thirdly*, establishing a lifestyle and expressing the Faith in the Holy Church in a way that aligns with national traditions. To achieve this goal, on one hand, Catholics in Vietnam need to study the Bible and theology to comprehend the core points of the faith. On the other hand, they must deepen their understanding of the traditions of each ethnic group in the country to explore their values. From these foundations, Catholics can develop a lifestyle and way of manifesting the faith to be in harmony with the traditions of every ethnic group in this homeland and the community of the Holy Church.<sup>37</sup>

In general, the Pastoral Letter 1980 marks a turning point in the theological thinking of the Catholic Church in Vietnam. It exhibits a new strategy of the Catholic Church to exist and spread the faith in a way that integrates with and accompanies the Vietnamese nation. This is something that never previously occurred at the official level of the entire Catholic Church in Vietnam. The Pastoral Letter 1980 confirms the development of a contextual ecclesiology in which the Holy Church follows the path: "*Song Phuc Am Giua Long*

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<sup>35</sup> The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam, *The 1980 Pastoral letter*, on <http://hdgmvietnam.org/thu-chung-1980-cua-hoi-dong-giam-muc-vietnam/216.116.3.aspx>, accessed on December 20, 2024.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam, *The 1980 Pastoral letter*, on <http://hdgmvietnam.org/thu-chung-1980-cua-hoi-dong-giam-muc-vietnam/216.116.3.aspx>, accessed on December 20, 2024.

*Dan Toc De Phuc Vu Hanh Phuc Cua Dong Bao/ Living with the Gospel in the nation to serve the happiness of compatriot”*.<sup>38</sup>

The spirit of the Pastoral Letter 1980 significantly inspired Vietnamese Catholics to establish a contextual theology, also known as Viet-theology. From the late 1980s to the 1990s, Viet-theology developed into a theological movement that spread extensively, both among domestic and overseas theologians and scholars. Domestically, one of the strongest organizations that earnestly promote the trend of contextualization of theology in Vietnam is Uy Ban Doan Ket Cong giao Vietnam/ The Committee for Solidarity of Vietnamese Catholics in Ho Chi Minh City. To facilitate the discussion of constructing contextual theology in Vietnam, this organization published a series of theological writings in the late 1980s and 1990s. Among these, there is a notable theological work entitled *Kito Giao Di Vao Van Hoa Viet Nam/ Christianity integrated into the Vietnamese culture* by Father An Son Vi.<sup>39</sup> This work presented an initial framework of a Viet-theology that needs to be based on four principles: (1) The filial piety (Dao Hieu) of Vietnamese culture and the infinite parental love of God in Heaven; (2) The philosophy of life of Vietnamese with the Semitic philosophy of the Bible; (3) Highlighting the social values in the Christian mysteries; and (4) Initially using Marxist words to express Christianity.

Along with the theological papers of Vietnamese priests, these collections introduced many discussions of foreign theologians to the Vietnamese Catholic intellectuals through translating foreign papers into Vietnamese. Examples include *The Guideline for Building the Asian Theology* by Sebastien Kappen, *The Correlation between Christianity with the Other Religions and Atheism* by F. Biot<sup>40</sup> and *Doing*

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> An Son Vi, *Kito giao di vao van hoa Viet Nam/ Christianity integrates with the Vietnamese culture*, (Ho Chi Minh city: Uy ban Doan ket Cong giao Viet Nam/ The Committee for Solidarity of Vietnamese Catholic, 10/1991).

<sup>40</sup> The Committee for Solidarity of Vietnamese Catholic in Ho Chi Minh city, *Huong toi mot nen Than hoc A Chau/ Towards an Asian Theology*, (Ho Chi Minh City: Uy ban Doan ket Cong giao Viet Nam/ The Committee for Solidarity of Vietnamese Catholic, 1989).

*the Theology in the Asian Motherland* by Choan Seng Song, a famous Christian theologian of Taiwan.<sup>41</sup>

Meanwhile, some overseas Vietnamese Catholic priests and thinkers actively discussed how to build Viet-Theology. In December 1992, the *Catholic Monthly Magazine (Thoi diem Cong giao)* based in the USA published a series of papers that talked about the issue of Christianity and acculturation. One of the most notable research papers was by Father Tran Cong Nghi, entitled *Co the co than hoc Viet Nam hay khong? (Whether could we build a Vietnamese theology?)*. Through this work, he contended that the construction of a Vietnamese theology necessitated utilizing the cognitive framework of the Vietnamese people, by the Vietnamese themselves, to interpret and understand Jesus Christ.<sup>42</sup>

In August 1996, a group of Vietnamese Christian priests and thinkers organized a conference that aimed at establishing a contextual theology for Vietnamese Catholicism. Going beyond merely proposing a general contextual theology, some theologians at this conference suggested the invention of a so-called Viet-theology. One of the prominent Vietnamese Catholic thinkers in the diaspora who advocated for the establishment of a Viet-Theology at that time was Tran Van Doan from the National Taiwan University in Taiwan. He defined this kind of theology as follows: "In order to Christianize Vietnamese, Christianity should become the first Vietnamese, in the same way of how God became man. Here is the starting point of the so-called Viet-Theology. Viet-Theology is understood as a system of Viet-thinking about God, as a particular way of Viet-believing in God, as a natural way of Viet-sensing God, and as a way of Viet-living with God."<sup>43</sup> It means that Viet-theology must primarily be a theology for Vietnamese. This sort of theology should be suitable to

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<sup>41</sup> The Committee for Solidarity of Vietnamese Catholic in Ho Chi Minh city, *Lam than hoc trong long me A Chau/ Doing the theology in Asian motherland*, (Ho Chi Minh City: Uy ban Doan ket Cong giao Viet Nam/ The Committee for Solidarity of Vietnamese Catholic, 10/1989).

<sup>42</sup> Tran Cong Nghi, "Co the co than hoc Viet Nam hay khong?/ Whether could we build a Vietnamese theology?", *Thoi Diem Cong Giao*, No.16, (1992), 4-12.

<sup>43</sup> Tran Van Doan, *Towards a Viet-Theology*, (France: Dinh Huong Tung Thu publisher, 1996), 89.

Vietnamese thinking and lifestyle, while also focusing on creating a way of religious life that enables the Vietnamese to believe in God.

Tran Van Doan argued that in efforts to build a Viet-Theology, theologians need to identify the differences between the Vietnamese way of thinking about God and Western theology (systematic theology). This can help Christian theologians in Vietnam overcome the difficulties faced by Western missionaries in the past. At the same time, based on the comparative approach, Tran Van Doan suggested that the theologians in Vietnam can find a reasonable way to establish six core aspects of the so-called Viet-theology, in distinction from Western systematic theology. These aspects include:

*Firstly*, in terms of the Methodological approach, Tran Van Doan explains that Viet-theology favors a sentimental and sensual approach, following a relational and dialectical path, and prioritizing internal categories. In contrast, systematic theology prefers a rational approach, often aligned with Cartesian, solipsistic, and analytic thinking, and using external categories to measure and verify belief. In summary, systematic theology is a system of abstract thinking about God and belief in God. It is *theoria pura* (pure theology). On the other hand, Viet-theology is characterized as practical theology or *theologia practica*. It is important to note that practical theology is not synonymous with pastoral theology.<sup>44</sup>

*Secondly*, in terms of the objective of theology, according to Tran Van Doan, the difference in methods (or ways) of thinking about, believing in, expressing, and sensing God primarily stems from the divergence in the objective of theology. In systematic theology, God is the central objective of study. However, in Viet-theology, theology should be merely treated as a way of helping humans discover their relationship with God and with nature. In this sense, the objective of Viet - Theology is the study of how man searches for God, senses the presence and love of God, and realizes himself by employing his belief in God. Therefore, the objective of theology can not be understood without investigating the history of salvation. For Viet-theology, belief is for the sake of being salvaged

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<sup>44</sup> Tran Van Doan, *Towards a Viet-Theology*, (France: Dinh Huong Tung Thu publisher, 1996), 89-90.

(credo quia salvatus sum), not for the sake of belief alone (credo ut intelligem). A belief without a practical purpose is so much empty as meaningless. As a praxis-oriented theology, Tran Van Doan argued that Viet-theology centers on the question of "What should be done to be saved by God?" rather than the problem of the existence of God, which is the main concern of systematic theology.<sup>45</sup>

*Thirdly*, regarding the comprehension of God, Tran Van Doan highlighted the significant divergence between the two theological ways in their understanding of God. In systematic theology, God is absolutized, while in Viet-theology, God is humanized. In Viet-theology, God is understood through the relationship between Him and human beings, rather than through logical or rational proof, as is the case in systematic theology. Additionally, scientific proof of the existence of God is a prerequisite in systematic theology in the way that without God, any systematic theology is impossible. Meanwhile, practical proof of the presence of God is required in Viet-theology. Moreover, in systematic theology, God is completely detached from His creatures, and there is no logical connection between God and man, whereas God is strongly related to human beings in Viet-theology. From the perspective of Viet-theology, without human participation, theology would be meaningless.<sup>46</sup>

*Fourthly*, regarding the category of man, Tran Van Doan explained that the role and the position of man are defined differently in the two theological approaches. In systematic theology, man, as a creature like any other, is passive and is to be saved by God's mercy. As such, man plays only an auxiliary role. In contrast, in Viet-theology, man is the center of the history of redemption and is the relational point between God and the earth. Additionally, man is created in systematic theology, while in Viet-theology, man is a co-creator. The values of man, therefore, are defined by the grace of God to let him participate in His Essence as an absolute value (Systematic Theology), while human values are defined by human beings themselves in Viet-theology.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Tran Van Doan, *Towards a Viet-Theology*, (France: Dinh Huong Tung Thu publisher, 1996), 90-91.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-92.

*Fifthly*, regarding the means of approaching God and the Means of Salvation, such as Sacraments and Rites, Tran Van Doan said that in Viet-theology, rites are seen as expressions of human love for God, human respect for God, and human gratitude to Him. In contrast, in Systematic theology, rites and especially sacraments are considered means to save, redemption, or the reduction of punishment. Another point is that Viet-theology views rites are variable, depending on the relationship between God and man, while systematic theology approaches the sacraments as rather invariable and strictly formal.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, regarding God-Man Relation, Tran Van Doan argued that the relationship between God, Man, and Nature is mutual, reciprocal, and flexible in Viet-theology while it is one-way, fixed, unequal, and authoritative (in the form of command) in systematic theology. The God-Man relation is expressed in the form of human relations, especially sensual and sentimental ones, in Viet-theology, while such a relationship is regulated by rules, and is purely rational in systematic theology.<sup>49</sup>

In the initial stage, the above suggestions of Tran Van Doan provide a useful framework for building Viet-theology. They cover important aspects of and identify practical ways to develop a contextual theology for Vietnamese Catholics. Moreover, his suggestions pointed out that the establishment of a theology taking Vietnamese characteristics would be impossible if Vietnamese theologians did not identify the differences between their contextual theology with the classical theology in the West.

Putting in a broader Asian context, Tran Van Doan's call to contextualize theology also aligns with the common movement of constructing contextual theology within the Asian framework after the Second Vatican Council, aiming to highlight local identities and make distinctions with Western theological paradigms. This trend was observed in other Asian Catholic communities. Notably, the movement of contextualization of theology in Asia was advocated by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), which was

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<sup>48</sup> Tran Van Doan, *Towards a Viet-Theology*, (France: Dinh Huong Tung Thu publisher, 1996), 92.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

founded in 1970 in Manila, Philippines. Following the aspiration of the Second Vatican Council, the FABC consistently encourages Asian theologians and churches to present theology in the local context and develop interreligious dialogue.<sup>50</sup> The integration into the Asian context is considered a necessity for the long-term development of Catholicism. The FABC said that “when the West shaped the Churches’ history. If the Asian Churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future”.<sup>51</sup> Many theologians subsequently made several efforts to create contextual theology, one that should embrace and manifest national and Asian identities. Starting in 1974, Kosuke Koyama called to build a sort of contextual theology named “Waterbuffalo Theology”, which endeavors to “discard all abstract ideas” and present more “understandable and realistic” expressions in theology.<sup>52</sup> This is a way of theological thinking that exhibits certain similarities with Tran Van Doan’s approach to building Viet-theology.

In 2000, a group of both domestic and overseas Vietnamese Catholic theologians collaborated on a thesis entitled *Suy tu va Dong gop cho Than hoc Viet Nam/ Thought and Contributions to Vietnamese Theology*. They came to agree on the necessity of inquiring into and comparing the similarities between the traditional culture of Vietnamese people and the theological features of Christianity. The comparison was aimed at providing the foundations to create what is called “Than Hoc Viet Nam” (Vietnamese Theology).<sup>53</sup> In his paper, Father Vu Dinh Trac reminded theological makers that FABC once proclaimed that Catholics must return to Asian traditions. Building on this spirit of FABC, Father Vu Dinh Trac emphasized the need for Vietnamese Catholics to have a sort of theology specifically for Vietnamese people, which is called *Than hoc Viet Nam* (Vietnamese theology). He further argued that such a kind of contextual theology

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<sup>50</sup> Kroeger J H MM, “Local Church, Dialogue and Conversion”, *FABC Papers*, No. 107, (2003), 1-64.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Koyama K, *Waterbuffalo Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1974), VII-VIII.

<sup>53</sup> Tran Cong Nghi, “Loi noi dau/ Introduction”, in *Suy tu va Dong gop cho Than hoc Viet Nam / Thought and Contributions to Vietnamese Theology*, ed., by Thoi Diem Cong Giao, (Luu hanh noi bo, 2000), 1.

should be sourced from the ideological traditions of Vietnamese people, such as *Triet ly Tam Tai* (Philosophy of Three Things such as Heaven, Earth, and Man), *Triet Ly Am Duong* (Philosophy of Yin and Yang), and *Triet ly Nong Nghiep* (Philosophy of Agriculture).<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusion

In short, from the early period to the end of the twentieth century, efforts to build contextual theology in Vietnam were carried out by many generations of Catholic theologians, with the involvement of early missionaries, and then the Vietnamese Catholic Church and theologians after 1975. It can be said that the contextualization of Catholic theology in Vietnam began to achieve certain notable results, shaping a theological framework that reflects the Vietnamese style and addresses cultural and religious issues specific to Vietnam. This is a sort of contextual theology that focuses primarily on three main themes: acculturation – interfaith dialogue – and mission.

As in other Christian missionary areas in Asia, the promotion of contextual theology within Catholic communities is one of the most important endeavors that has helped spread the Catholic faith and promote Catholic integration into the culture and society of Vietnam. Only through acculturation and interfaith dialogue can the Catholic community establish a deep foundation in Vietnamese culture, which has an ancient tradition and diverse religious beliefs, especially the tradition of Three Religions (Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism) and ancestor worship. Following the way of contextualizing theology, it can be said that endeavors by Vietnamese theologians aimed to construct a model of contextual theology – The Synthetic Model. This model, as Bevans argued, is “an ongoing theological movement” to not only align with tradition,

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<sup>54</sup> Vu Dinh Trac, “Triet ly truyen thong Viet toc don duong cho than hoc Viet Nam/ Philosophical traditions of Vietnamese people make the way for Vietnamese theology”, in *Suy tu va Dong gop cho Than hoc Viet Nam / Thought and Contributions to Vietnamese Theology*, ed. by Thoi Diem Cong Giao, (Luu hanh noi bo, 2000), 12-26.

scripture, and doctrine, as well as temporary local context but also to aim at changing the nature of culture.<sup>55</sup>

However, in the contemporary context of Vietnam, the gap between Catholicism and other Vietnamese realities still exists. The reasons for this distance stem from the differences in faith traditions, consequences of historical persecution, and certain conflicts of interest that arose during the process of innovation in Vietnam. In addition, the Catholic Church must engage in competition with other religious organizations in Vietnam to attract new followers. Furthermore, the trend of building Viet-Theology is not being promoted as strongly as it was in the past. Therefore, in the future, the Catholic theologians in Vietnam need to continue advancing this trend as one of the movements that demonstrates its usefulness in establishing religious tolerance in Vietnam. Following such an orientation, the Catholic Church in Vietnam will be able to sustain a harmonious co-existence with the national traditions and adapt to the transformations of Vietnamese culture, religion, and society.

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<sup>55</sup> Pears A, *Doing Contextual Theology*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 28.

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