CHAPTER SIX
MISSIONARY COLONIAL EXPANSION
AND THE UPPER TONKIN VICARIATE

Practically all the authors discussed in this chapter are missionaries. Only on occasion will a voice from the colonial administration—men again—be heard. This account, therefore, does not attempt to cover the full range of the colonial politics of missionary expansion in Tonkin, which would require many more voices to be inserted in the narrative and, in any case, it is the work of historians. Here, we will attach ourselves to the missionary side of the story. A good deal of attention will be paid to identifying individual missionaries, their intellectual itineraries (whenever possible), their exact postings, the course of their actions, and as much as possible, their mind sets when they wrote. Providing such details is needed for a number of reasons as were exposed earlier in this book, including being able to link the texts of these missionaries with specific local populations and with the texts of other colonial agents of that period.

In the narrative that is about to unfold, we will first meet the dominant figure of missionary Tonkin at the end of the 19th century, Bishop Paul Puginier (1835–1892), and consider his seminal influence in the establishment and the expansion of the Upper-Tonkin vicariate, a phase that lasted from 1895 to about 1920. Then, we will see that a lull in missionary activity preceded a slow decline, leading to the final termination of most missionary activity in the first years of the First Indochina War (1946–1954). Indeed, the Upper-Tonkin vicariate rose and fell within half a century.

1 This chapter is based in part on my article “French Missionary Expansion in Colonial Upper-Tonkin.” Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 287–310, 2004a, reproduced here with the Journal’s kind permission and with alterations to adapt to the needs of this book.

Acknowledging the importance of contextualising missionary expansion within the political extension of a colonial power, we need to outline the political foundations of missionary deployment in the upper region of Tonkin. Historian Cao Huy Thuận has discussed the successive stages of missionary collaboration in the colonial takeover, showing how churchmen even contributed to guiding this takeover, using it as leverage to implant their missions in Tonkin during the first decades of the French presence. One character stands out in this process as the most central and most powerful cleric that colonial Tonkin—and perhaps French Indochina—ever saw. This was Paul-François Puginier, Bishop in partibus of Mauricastre, and vicar apostolic of West Tonkin and of Hanoi from 1868 to 1892, a key figure in the establishment and expansion of French rule in Vietnam. Puginier has received a good deal of attention from various writers starting with a pious and hefty hagiography by Father Eugène Louvet as early as 1894.

In the 1880s in the Red River Delta and its lower mountainous periphery, the advance of the French conquest caused many mandarins faithful to the Emperor in Hue—and concerned with maintaining their privileged position—to support the resistance. In response, the conquering French military machine launched its mission de pacification, an unforgiving military campaign that was to last a full decade. These were troubled times, and France’s Residents and Governors General in Hue and Hanoi rarely remained in their postings for more than a year. Indeed, 15 came and went in less than 15 years between the nomination of Doctor Jules Harmand in 1883 and the arrival of Paul Doumer in 1897. Their administrations were short-sighted and sometimes brutal. Only a few visionaries among these administrators could foresee the potential of the new protectorate; among them Governor General Antoine de Lanessan, who held the post from June 1891 to December 1894.

In a study published two years before taking up his governorship, the strongly anticlerical Lanessan declared (referring directly to Bishop Puginier) that:

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