
The seventeenth-century Jesuit missionary Alexandre de Rhodes is a household name within Vietnam and among scholars and others interested in Vietnam. His main claim to fame was the development of a Romanized script for Vietnamese, which up until then was exclusively rendered through demotic scripts: Han (Chinese, mostly used for administrative purposes) and Nom (a Vietnamese transliteration of Han, for domestic and literary purposes). A modernized version of De Rhodes’ script was introduced by the French during their colonial rule in Vietnam, and later adopted by the revolutionary Viet Minh as part of their universal literacy strategy. For this reason, Alexandre de Rhodes has been the subject of a number of scholarly, religious, political, and popular biographies, and his linguistic work has been subjected to a variety of analyses.

The Catholic priest and Ignacio Ellacuria Professor of Catholic Social Thought at Georgetown University, Peter C. Phan, took it upon himself to throw a different light on the legacy of De Rhodes by focusing on his Vietnamese-language catechism. In his two-part *Mission and Catechesis*, Phan offers in Part Two an English translation of De Rhodes’ *Catechismus*, which was intended to explain to a seventeenth-century Vietnamese public the main points and the mysteries of the Christian religion in eight steps—in eight days, to be precise. Phan notes the similarity of De Rhodes’ Vietnamese catechism with the earlier Chinese text *T’ien-chu Shih-I* [The true meaning of the Lord of Heaven] by Matteo Ricci, whose influence at the court of the Emperor in Beijing has been the subject of many scholarly analyses, e.g. by major sinologists like Jonathan Spence and Simon Leys. Ricci structured his catechism in the form of eight dialogues between a Western Christian scholar and a Chinese Confucian scholar (p. 118). Although De Rhodes received a copy of Ricci’s work only after he had authored his own catechism, Phan notes no less than fifteen points of resemblance—most importantly the emphasis that both Ricci and De Rhodes lay on the use of ‘natural reason,’ and the effort to repudiate Buddhism and present Christianity as close to—and not antithetical to—Confucianism.

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Curiously, Part One, “Mission and catechesis in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam,” had been published previously, in 1998, by the same publisher, under the same title as the present book, and apparently has not been changed in any way. From a scholarly point of view beyond theology, Part One should be much more interesting, because it is largely based on archival material from the Vatican, from the Jesuit order, and from various collections in Paris, Lisbon, Madrid, Avignon, and Vaucluse. Part One contains chapters on Vietnam in the seventeenth century; on Alexandre de Rhodes’ biography; on the history, structure, and method of his catechism; on the catechism’s theological message for a Vietnamese public; and on ‘inculturation’ assessed from a ‘contemporary’ vantage point. Unfortunately, Phan’s treatment of his subject matter leaves much to be desired, both in scholarly evenness, distance, and empathy.

In Chapter One, for instance, the author describes non-Christian religious beliefs and practices in highly derogatory terms. Religious beliefs and practices that differ from Catholic doctrine constitute little more than superstition, leading Phan to question “whether the Vietnamese are ‘religious’” (p. 27). His answer is that if religion is defined as resembling Christianity, “then the great majority of the Vietnamese are not religious. But if by religion is meant a worldview in which the invisible is present, the supernatural is efficacious, the spiritual is dominant, then one must say that the Vietnamese are obsessed with religion. There is nothing, literally nothing, in the personal life of the Vietnamese, in their family relationships, and in their sociopolitical organization that escapes the presence and influence of ong Troi [Lord of Heaven] and of the than [local spirits], the ma [ghosts], the qui [demons], and the ancestors” (pp. 27–28). In other words, if religion includes practices that Phan considers ‘superstitious,’ then the Vietnamese do not lack it. Peter Phan is of course entitled to his religious convictions, but as a scholar he turns out to be a highly partial and subjective observer.

The book undoubtedly offers useful insight into the worldview and methods of Alexandre de Rhodes, if only because the author seems to share most of De Rhodes’ convictions, chiding the latter only for his “sexism” (pp. 170–173). Indeed, the text of Part One abounds with normative—and often judgmental—adjectives rooted in a firm belief in the literal truth contained in the Bible, as was common in the seventeenth century. Both De Rhodes’ thoughts and actions and those of his adversaries—lords, mandarins, Buddhist monks—are glossed in such normative terms, to a point where Phan’s partiality takes an—in my view—quite macabre turn: “If the blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians, then the institution of catechists was the cradle in which martyrs were born, nurtured, and came to full maturity” (p. 105).