THE MISSION OF GOD

ITS CHALLENGES AND DEMANDS IN TODAY’S WORLD

Peter C. Phan

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DOING THEOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF MISSION: LESSONS FROM ALEXANDRE DE RHODES, S.J.*

Perhaps at no time a Christian theologian would feel more challenged to do theology in a novel way and to renew the received tradition than when communicating the Good News to those who have never heard it, in a foreign land, in an unfamiliar culture, in a different language; in short, when doing theology in view or in the context of mission. Of course, no theologian, whether fundamental, systematic, or practical, can eschew the task of reformulating the contents of Christian revelation in terms understandable to the audience, whether it is the academy, the church, or the society, to use David Tracy's categories (1981: 3-46). To fulfill the task of making the Word of God meaningful for their contemporaries, the theologians must bring into a critical correlation the two poles of theology, whether these are termed "question" and "answer" (Tillich), "oratio oblique" and oratio recta" (Lonergan), or "common human experience and language" and the Christian texts" (Tracy). In carrying out this task of mutual correlation, a certain amount of adapting the Christian message to the linguistic, cultural, politico-economic, and religious conditions of the hearers (as well as confronting the contemporary world with the revealed Word) is both necessary and desirable.²

For most theologians who live and work in the West this "adaptation," to use a somewhat neutral term, might not seem a formidable task. Linguistically, it is relatively easy to translate most philosophical and theological French or German or Spanish words into English and the other way round since they share the same roots (e.g., 'substance' and 'hypostatic union'). In cases of idiosyncratic coinages (e.g., Heidegger's existential and 'existentiell'), the difficulty could be obviated by simply transliterating the words without thereby sounding too exotic (and with the added benefit of appearing learned and profound to boot!). Even theological terms

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that had been objects of long and bitter controversies (e. g., hypostasis/ousia) before their admission into the realm of the Christian discourse, have become so much part of the lingua franca of the academy that knowledge of their meaning is considered as a condition for cultural literacy.

Furthermore, in spite of the much-trumpeted pluralism, there still remains in the West a two-thousand-year common (implicitly Christian) cultural heritage that offers a shared language with which ideological opponents can at least make themselves understood to one another. Moreover, with the demise of socialism and communism, democracy and capitalism are gaining ground as the only viable political and economic systems, creating a relatively homogeneous and free ambiance, at least in the West, in which theology as an academic discipline can be cultivated. Here, more than anywhere else, theologians can organize themselves into professional guilds, with their own associations, journals, and conferences, so that theology has become, to use Thomas Kuhn's expression, a "normal science." Finally, as far as Christianity is concerned, it is true that it has long lost its hegemony, but numerically Christians, who still exercise a powerful influence on Western society, constitute by far the majority of believers. It goes without saying that all these commonalities—linguistic, cultural, politico-economic, and religious—simplify somewhat the task of adapting the Christian faith to the contemporary society in the West.

That no such common terrain exists in countries, especially in Asia, where Christians form but the tiniest part of the population, hardly needs a lengthy elaboration. As is well known, even such fundamental words as God, sin, and salvation, let alone the theological contents they carry, do not have exact equivalents in some Asian languages, which makes translation, even by way of dynamic equivalence, extremely difficult. Nor can recourse be had to simple transliteration, which would make the words sound unbearably foreign. Moreover, differences among worldviews are so deep that the same verbal expression, gesture, ritual, and material object present in both Christianity and non-Christian religions generally have different functions and meanings. Finally, in many Third World (or Two-Third-World) countries, especially those under the communist regime, conditions are generally hostile to the development of theology as an academic discipline, not only
in the academy but also in the church. Needless to say, under these circumstances, the "adaptation" of the Christian faith to the local cultures is an extremely complex affair.

This essay will examine some of the challenges confronting Christian theology as it goes about the task of expressing the contents of the Christian faith in various cultural forms, especially the non-Western ones, a task that is now known under the neologism of "inculturation." The results emerging from this work will contribute to the construction of the theological discipline called "comparative theology." As has been noted above, this task is incumbent upon all types of theology, but it is of special urgency for the kind of theology done in the context and in view of mission. To limit the scope of the discussion and to make it concrete I will refer to the work of Alexandre de Rhodes, a seventeenth-century Jesuit missionary to Vietnam.

Before broaching the subject a word about mission is in order. By mission or evangelization is meant here the church's task of continuing the missio Dei, the work of the Triune God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, for the sake of the world (Bosch 1991: 389-93). Pope John Paul II distinguishes three "situations" for contemporary mission. The first is that in which the church addresses peoples, groups and socio-cultural contexts in which Christ and his Gospel are not known, or which lack Christian communities sufficiently mature to be able to incarnate the faith in their environment and proclaim it to other groups (mission ad gentes). The second is that in which there are Christian communities with adequate and solid ecclesial structures, able to bear witness to the Gospel in their surroundings and committed to the universal mission (pastoral care). The third is that in which the ancient, and occasionally, younger churches have lost a living sense of faith or have moved away from Christ and the church ("new evangelization" or "re-evangelization"). Finally, missionary activities include but cannot be reduced to any of the following: proclamation, witness, worship, inculturation, liberation, and inter-religious dialogue.

In this essay, though not excluding the other situations of mission and its manifold activities, I will focus on the mission ad gentes as well as on inculturation and interreligious dialogue (especially theological dialogue), since, as has been shown above, it
is here that theologians are most strongly challenged to do theology in a new way. I will preface my discussion with a brief outline of Alexandre de Rhodes' life and work as a missionary in Vietnam. After this overview, I will reflect on some aspects of doing theology in view of mission by examining the relevant missionary strategies of de Rhodes. Finally, I will conclude with suggestions as to how this mission and comparative theology could be done today.

Alexandre de Rhodes and his Mission in Vietnam

Though not the first to arrive in Vietnam, de Rhodes is often proclaimed the founder of Vietnamese Christianity. No doubt he deserves this accolade. First, he carried out a highly successful mission in both parts of Vietnam, Tonkin and Cochinchina. Secondly, besides two priceless memoirs on the Vietnamese society in the seventeenth century and on the beginnings of Vietnamese Christianity, he published the first books, including a catechism, in Vietnamese in the Romanized script. With regard to the alphabetization of the Vietnamese language, de Rhodes was not its inventor but perfecter and popularizer. In this work he derived much help from the unpublished dictionaries of Gaspar do Amaral and Antonio Barbosa, both now lost. After being confined to Roman Catholics for two centuries, the Romanized script became the national script (quoc ngu) at the beginning of the twentieth century, replacing both Chinese and chu nom (the demotic script). Thirdly, he successfully lobbied for the establishment of a hierarchy in Vietnam. Thanks to his persistent efforts, in 1659, two bishops, François Pallu and Pierre Lambert de la Motte, were appointed apostolic vicars of Tonkin and Cochinchina respectively.

Born in Avignon on March 15, 1593, Alexandre de Rhodes joined the Jesuit novitiate in Rome to pursue his missionary vocation. Shortly after his priestly ordination in 1618, de Rhodes was granted by Superior General Mutio Vitelleschi the permission to go to the mission in Japan. On July 20, 1619, de Rhodes left Lisbon, and after six months and ten days arrived in Goa. After a lengthy delay in Goa, on April 22, 1622, de Rhodes resumed his journey to Macao where he arrived on May 29, 1623. De Rhodes stayed at the Jesuit college Madre de Deus, preparing himself for his mission in Japan by learning the Japanese language.
De Rhodes' First Mission in Cochinchina (1624-1626)

De Rhodes' dream of being a missionary in Japan was not to be realized. Because of persecutions in Japan, de Rhodes' superiors thought it wise not to send him there. Instead, they dispatched him to Cochinchina.¹⁷

There were three Jesuit residences in Cochinchina when de Rhodes arrived in the country. He was assigned to that of Thanh Chiem to study the language under the guidance of Francisco de Pina.¹⁸ Meanwhile Andrea Palmiero, the Jesuit visitor, was planning to send missionaries to Tonkin. In July 1626, de Rhodes and Pedro Marques were recalled to Macao to prepare for their mission in Tonkin.

De Rhodes' Mission in Tonkin (1627-1630)

On March 1627, the two missionaries embarked a Portuguese merchant ship for Tonkin and arrived at Cua Bang (today Ba Lang) on March 19, 1627. Shortly afterwards, they met Lord Trinh Trang who was on his way to wage war against Cochinchina. When Lord Trinh Trang returned in defeat from his military expedition, the missionaries accompanied him to Thang Long, the capital, and there began their mission in earnest. The great number of conversions aroused the opposition of eunuchs, Buddhist monks, and the concubines dismissed by their husbands who decided to become Christian. One of the monks accused the missionaries of joining in a plot against Lord Trinh Trang. As a result, on May 28, 1628, Lord Trinh Trang issued a decree forbidding his subjects, under pain of death, to meet with the missionaries and to embrace the religion they preached.

However, the lord tolerated the presence of de Rhodes and Marques in the hope that they would attract Portuguese traders. When the Portuguese ships had not come during the sailing season, the lord expelled the missionaries. In March 1629, they left for the south with the plan to return to Macao. However, in November, when two Jesuits, Gaspar do Amaral and Paul Saito, arrived, de Rhodes and Marques returned to the capital in their company. At first, Lord Trinh Trang tolerated their presence, but after six
months, when the Portuguese ship returned to Macao, he ordered them to embark the ship and leave the country.

In May 1630, de Rhodes left Tonkin, never to return. He had worked there for more than three years. By numerical standards alone, his mission had been a huge success: when he left, there were 5,602 Christians.19

Banished from Tonkin de Rhodes returned to Macao and stayed there for ten years during which he taught theology at the Madre de Deus College and took care of Chinese Christians. However, in 1639, events in Cochinchina once again made de Rhodes’ missionary experience highly desirable. There were then some 15,000 Christians and 20 churches in central Vietnam.20 In 1639, the lord of Cochinchina, Nguyen Phuoc Lan, who suspected that the missionaries had assisted his brother’s rebellion against him, ordered the seven Jesuits to leave the country.

De Rhodes’ Second Mission to Cochinchina (1640-1645)

Eager to continue the mission in Cochinchina, the new visitor Antonio Rubino canvassed for someone to send there. De Rhodes volunteered and was accepted. Thus began de Rhodes’ second mission to Cochinchina. It was divided into four trips and lasted a total of 50 months, from 1640 to 1645. As a whole, it was far more difficult and eventful than his mission in Tonkin. Four times he was exiled from the country.

During the 50 months de Rhodes spent in Cochinchina between 1640 and 1645, he baptized some 3,400 people, without counting the baptisms administered by his catechists. Compared with his mission in Tonkin which produced 5,602 conversions, de Rhodes’ second mission in Cochinchina produced significantly fewer, though it was much longer and much more strenuous (50 versus 38 months). On July 3, 1645, sentenced to perpetual exile from Cochinchina, de Rhodes left Vietnam for Macao.
Return to Rome and the Establishment of the Hierarchy in Vietnam

De Rhodes' superiors in Macao decided that a man of his experience could render a vast service to the missions by going back to Europe to fetch spiritual and temporal help. In December 1645, de Rhodes began his return journey to Rome. Immediately after his arrival on June 27, 1649, he set out to realize his plan of having a hierarchy established in Vietnam.

On September 11, 1652, de Rhodes left for Paris where he found three priests of the Société des Bons Amis who were judged worthy candidates for the episcopacy, among whom was Francois Pallu. On learning that Rome was about to send French bishops to Vietnam, Portugal voiced fierce opposition. Meanwhile the Jesuit General, believing that de Rhodes' presence in the project of establishing a hierarchy in Vietnam would prevent it from being realized, decided to make him superior of the Jesuit mission in Persia. On November 16, 1654, de Rhodes left Marseilles for his new mission where he died on November 5, 1660. But his dream of having a hierarchy for Vietnam was fulfilled shortly before his death when on September 9, 1659, Propaganda Fide published a decree, confirmed by Pope Alexander VII, establishing two apostolic vicariates with two bishops François Pallu and Pierre Lambert de la Motte.21

Doing Theology in the Context of Mission

As one of the first missionaries to Vietnam, sometimes working alone for long stretches of time, de Rhodes faced a plethora of diverse challenges. Besides having to adapt his personal lifestyle to the local way of life,22 he had to deal with Vietnamese cultural practices that appeared to be at odds with the Christian faith and ethics.23 In addition, and more importantly, there were issues arising from the differences between Christianity on the one hand and the four religions of Vietnam—Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and the indigenous religion—on the other.24 Finally, there were ecclesial concerns such as sacramental and liturgical celebrations and the organization of the nascent church.25

However, the most urgent task for de Rhodes in the seventeenth century as well as for theologians working today in
view of the mission ad gentes is no doubt how to translate Christian theological terms into the language of the people to whom the Gospel is preached. Most often this task is undertaken in the process of translating the Bible (which obtains priority with Protestant missionaries) or the catechism (which usually receives the immediate attention of Catholics) into the vernacular. But whether it is the Bible or the catechism, the task of finding the equivalent expressions in the vernacular for Christian terms remains an indispensable first step of the process of constructing a Christian theology in view of mission.

Translating Christian Texts into the Vernacular

As mentioned above, translating texts from one language (e.g., German) to another belonging to a different linguistic family (e.g., Vietnamese) is much more difficult than from one language to another belonging to the same linguistic group or family. In the former case, which obtains in most missionary situations, the formal-equivalence approach to translation, matching the vocabulary, structure, and even the word order of the original as closely as possible in the receptor language, is rarely achievable. Indeed, any striving for fidelity by means of formal-equivalence will lead very quickly, as Eugene Nida has shown with abundant examples, to infidelity if not comic absurdity (1952). Rather, here the dynamic-equivalence approach, which attempts to respect the individuality of each receptor language by expressing the meaning of the original in a linguistic structure peculiar to that language, with a watchful and sharp eye for its cultural context, is the only appropriate one (Nida 1964).

Without the benefit of linguistics and the science of translation, de Rhodes instinctively gravitated toward the dynamic-equivalence approach when he composed his Cathechismus and in the process had to find Vietnamese equivalents for Christian terms. That he had at his disposal the resources of his colleagues, in particular Francisco de Pina (1585-1625) and the handwritten (now lost) dictionaries by Gaspar do Amaral (1592-1645) and Antonio Barbosa (1594-1647), does not lessen his merits and the importance of his work.

While space does not allow a detailed consideration of how de Rhodes translated Christian theological terms into Vietnamese, one
example will show how he was extremely careful in translating the most important word, God. It is well known that when Christian missionaries arrived in China, they were faced with the problem of deciding which of the three available terms, tien (heaven), shang ti (sovereign on high), and t'ien chu or t'ien ti (lord of heaven). Ricci's proposal to use all the four terms interchangeably for God was, as mentioned above, rejected by Benedict XIV who decreed that only t'ien chu should be used. In seventeenth-century Vietnam, there were two modes of written communication. One was the Chinese language and its script, the knowledge of which was the mark of education and which was used in official documents; it is known as chu nho (learned script). The other was the chu nom (demotic or popular script), which combined various Chinese characters to convey the meaning and represent the sound of Vietnamese words.28

Due to the millennium-long domination of the Chinese over Vietnam, there developed in the Vietnamese language a set of vocabularies parallel to the native language. These words, called Sino-Vietnamese in distinction from the pure-Vietnamese ones, originate from Chinese and are used mostly in literary, philosophical, and scientific disciplines (a parallel case is found in English in which words of Germanic origin are paired with those of Greek or Latin derivation, e.g., 'all-knowing' and 'omniscient'). With regard to God, there were in de Rhodes' times Sino-Vietnamese words corresponding to the Chinese ones: thien (t'ien), thuong de (shang ti), thien chuá (t'ien chu), and thien de (t'ien ti).

Interestingly, the earliest missionaries did not make use of any of these terms but transliterated the Latin Deus into Chua Deu (Lord Deus). While the expression may be "faithful" to the original, it suffers from an enormous disadvantage in that it fails to convey to the Vietnamese the meaning of who God is and runs the risk of suggesting to them that the Christian God is some other god beside the one of the Vietnamese religions. More importantly, it does not attempt to inculcate the Christian notion of God into the Vietnamese culture.

De Rhodes' own practice in translating the word 'God' is extremely instructive and has important implications for constructing a comparative theology. He himself explained how he arrived at a suitable translation for 'God.' In March 19, 1627 he and
his companion Pero Marques arrived at Cua Bang in Tonkin. As the Portuguese ship came ashore, a crowd of Vietnamese rushed out to see who the newcomers were, where they came from, and what merchandise they were bringing in. De Rhodes took advantage of the people's curiosity to explain, in fluent Vietnamese (to their surprise and delight!), the purpose of his mission. He explained that while most of the people who had just arrived were Portuguese merchants seeking to trade goods and arms, he had a precious pearl to sell so cheap that even the poorest among them could afford. When the people wanted to see the pearl, he told that it could not be seen with bodily but only with spiritual eyes. The pearl, he said, was the true way (dao, which also means religion in Vietnamese) that leads to the happy and everlasting life. In an illuminating passage de Rhodes records this momentous exchange:

Having heard of the Law which they call dao in scholarly language and dang in popular tongue, which means way, they became all the more curious to know from me the true law, the true way that I wanted to show them. Thereupon I talked to them about the sovereign principle of all created beings. I decided to announce it to them under the name of the Lord of heaven and earth, finding no proper word in their language to refer to God. Indeed, what they commonly call Phat or But designates nothing but an idol. And knowing that the cult of idols was held in high esteem by the leaders and doctors of the kingdom, I do not think proper to designate God with these words. Rather I decided to employ the name used by the apostle Saint Paul when he preached to the Athenians who had set up an altar to all unknown God. This God, he said, whom they adored without knowing him, is the Lord of heaven and earth. It was therefore under this name, full of majesty even in the hearts of the pagans, that I first announced to them that the true way consisted first and foremost in fulfilling our legitimate duties to the Lord of heaven and earth by the means he has revealed to us. 29

Differently from Athens, there were no altars dedicated to the 'Unknown God' at Cua Bang, though there were no doubt pagodas and temples in honor of the Buddha and the spirits. However, like the Athenians who were said by Paul to be "deisidaimonesterous" (not "superstitious" as King James Version would have it), the Vietnamese were no less religious since the name the Lord of heaven and earth was said to be "full of majesty, even in the hearts
of the pagans." There is therefore an explicit recognition of the presence of God among those who have not yet accepted the Gospel (the "pagans"). Nevertheless, in trying to translate 'God' into Vietnamese, de Rhodes faced a quandary. He found, he said, "no proper word in their language to refer to God." The two words Phat and But, which presumably most of his audience knew, do not refer to God. The former refers to the Buddha, the latter also refers to the Buddha but in popular language. There was another word, widely used by the Vietnamese to refer to God but not mentioned by de Rhodes, Ong Troi, literally, Mr. Heaven.30 De Rhodes objected to the use of Phat and But because they designate "nothing but an idol." On the other hand, the reason why he did not mention Ong Troi might be that, as we read later in Cathechismus, he was afraid that it may suggest that the material heaven is divine.31

There were, of course, the four Sino-Vietnamese terms for God, as mentioned above. But de Rhodes declined to use them, most probably because being part of the learned language, they would not be readily understandable to the common people who were gathering around him. Instead, on the basis of the Pauline terminology, he coined a new expression: Duc Chua Troi Dat (the Honorable Lord of heaven and earth). Duc is a honorific title; Chua means lord and was used as the title of the heads of the state of Tonkin and of the state of Cochinchina; troi, means heaven or firmament; and dat means earth.

In his translation de Rhodes achieved several significant things which should be kept in mind as useful guidelines as we embark upon our task of constructing a comparative theology. First, he did not have recourse to transliteration but attempted to find a dynamic equivalent in Vietnamese for 'God,' in so doing he was beginning the first step of the process which today goes under the name of inculturation. Secondly, he paid careful attention to the religious context and the various meanings and functions a word has in it. This context, it must be noted, consists not only of classic texts but also of the concrete practice of the common people. In this way, he could avoid the misunderstandings caused by the use of words in the receptor language that seem to be similar to the Christian vocabulary in written texts but have acquired a different connotation in popular religious practice. Thirdly, he opted for the popular but pure-Vietnamese language over the learned but foreign (and imperialistic) language; in this way he kept close to the "soul"
of the culture and indirectly contributed to the emergence of cultural and national identity. Fourthly, in devising linguistic equivalents he derived his inspiration as far as possible from biblical terminologies and expressions, in this case Paul's "ouranou kai gës kurios" (Acts 17:24). Finally, though perhaps unintentionally, de Rhodes invoked one of the fundamental principles of Vietnamese philosophy, which may be termed "cosmotheandric" or "theanthropocosmic," according to which heaven (the divine), earth (the cosmos), and humanity (troi, dat, nguoi) must always be viewed in strict unity with one another. At the same time, thanks to the Christian doctrine of creation, he could highlight God's transcendence in his immanence as creator.33

Encounter with Non-Christian Religions

Inevitable for any Christian missionary and theologian working in Southeast Asia, both in de Rhodes' time and in our time, is an encounter with Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism as well as the indigenous religions of each country. Needless to say, developments in Catholic theology since the seventeenth century, especially after the Second Vatican Council, have created a paradigm shift in the Catholic Church's attitude toward and evaluation of non-Christian religions.34 It has abandoned the "exclusivistic" theology of religions embodied in the axiom extra ecclesiam nulla salus, and most of its theologians have embraced "inclusivism," with a few proposing even "pluralism."35

It would be altogether anachronistic to expect that de Rhodes entertain the possibility that non-Christians could be saved without baptism or to regard non-Christian religions as alternative ways of salvation. Indeed, it is not difficult to show how his expositions of the doctrines and beliefs of the "Three Religions" (tam giao) as well as the indigenous religion of Vietnam are riddled with inaccuracies and misunderstandings.36 Unlike Matteo Ricci, de Rhodes did not know enough Chinese to read and study the Chinese classics first hand; whatever information he had on Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism as systems of beliefs were second or third hand. Moreover, his interest was predominantly apologetic and missionary. Viewing these religions mainly as "superstition," de Rhodes was concerned with helping the catechumens reject them in favor of Christianity.37 Needless to say, no one today would and should take
de Rhodes as a reliable guide on the beliefs of Vietnamese Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and indigenous religion.

This necessary caveat said, it must be acknowledged that there are things in de Rhodes' dealing with non-Christian religions that can furnish useful suggestions as to how a comparative or missionary theology can be constructed. First, in spite of his vigorous attacks against the doctrines of the non-Christian religions, de Rhodes was firm in rejecting the method which he noted was adopted by other missionaries according to which "it is necessary first to destroy the errors of paganism and disabuse the minds of pagans of these erroneous views before establishing and teaching the doctrines and principles of the Christian religion" (Histoire du Royaume, 175). Instead, de Rhodes recommended that one not attack the errors of the non-Christian religions "before establishing the truths knowable by the light of natural reason... The goal is to build in the hearers' minds a sort of firm foundation on which the rest of their faith can be supported and not turn them off, which often happens, by our rebutting and ridiculing their devotions, false though they are, and their superstitious observances" (Histoire du Royaume, 175-76). In other words, it is necessary in interreligious dialogue as well as in comparative theology to search out first the common doctrines shared by Christianity and the other religions. This method should not be construed as false irenicism which would ignore the real doctrinal differences among various religions. For the sake of the truth, a critique of the errors of the other religions is necessary, but it should be done only after a sympathetic study of the commonalities that bring all the religions together. Thus, de Rhodes was convinced that there were elements of truth and goodness in non-Christian religions.38

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, in trying to understand non-Christian religions, de Rhodes focused more on how people actually lived their religions in their daily lives than on the classical texts of these religions. Partly because he did not know the Chinese classics well, partly because he was primarily a hands-on missionary,39 de Rhodes rarely referred to texts in describing the "Three Religions" and the Vietnamese indigenous religion.40 But whatever lack of theoretical knowledge he might have had of the beliefs of non-Christian religions, he made up for it, superbly and abundantly, with his first-hand and extensive knowledge of the religious practices of seventeenth-century Vietnamese.
Almost all of his descriptions of the prayers, devotions, rituals, and customs of the Vietnamese religions are eye-witness reports. In a true sense, de Rhodes was an anthropologist engaged in field work avant la lettre. Given the scarcity of Vietnamese historical documents, were it not for his memoirs, we would be in the dark about the religious practices of seventeenth-century Vietnam.

For the purpose of comparative theology, de Rhodes' practice serves as an important reminder that methodologically comparisons among various religions should not be limited to the analysis of classic texts nor to that of rituals and practices as prescribed in liturgical and ethical manuals (the métier of academic theologians). Rather religious beliefs, moral code, and rituals as well as texts that describe or prescribe them can be fully understood only when attention is paid to the context of the actual practicing of these beliefs and moral code, and celebration of these rituals. The text and the context are intimately intertwined, the one illuminating, modifying, correcting the other. Thus, a comparative theology constructed on the basis of texts alone will necessarily be incomplete and even skew.

An example, which is of extreme importance for the Catholic Church in Asia, not only in the seventeenth century but also today, will drive home this point. As is well known, the question of the veneration of ancestors was hotly debated among missionaries in China, with (generally) Jesuits taking a favorable position, and (generally) Franciscans, Dominicans, and other religious taking the opposing side. Prescinding from ecclesiastical politics and differences in missionary methods, it is clear that Matteo Ricci and his fellow Jesuits could defend the legitimacy of ancestor veneration (in particular, the cult of Confucius) on the ground that it is "political and civic in nature" and not religious only by appealing to texts and perhaps the practice of the elite.

However, de Rhodes, a Jesuit himself, was deeply convinced otherwise and was adamantly and vigorously opposed to the practice of ancestor worship because he considered it religious and therefore "superstitious." His arguments were not derived from an analysis of texts but from his first-hand observation of how the Vietnamese people "worshipped" Confucius and how they celebrated funerals and death anniversaries. He gave detailed, vivid, and surprisingly accurate descriptions of these rituals and
prayers and severely proscribed them. A contemporary comparative theology of the cult of ancestors would thus be severely lopsided were it limited only to an analysis of classical texts. It must take into account popular understanding and practices of this cult and recognize its deeply religious character. Of course, with this recognition, it need not conclude to its being a superstition and therefore to be proscribed. The precise challenge for such comparative theology is to understand how such religious practice can legitimately be incorporated into Christian theology and liturgy.

The Ordering of Christian Doctrines

Another issue for comparative theology on which de Rhodes' practice may shed useful light is the ordering of Christian doctrines. The question is often raised as to which Christian doctrines should be given priority, both methodologically, and substantively, in the dialogue with non-Christian religions, especially in Asia. De Rhodes was aware that for many missionaries the mystery of the Trinity "should be expounded to catechumens only after they have been disposed to receive baptism in order to avoid troubling their minds with doubts which this sublime and ineffable mystery might induce" (Histoire du Royaume, 129). Experience, de Rhodes claimed, taught him otherwise: "I do not believe that we should wait until the time of baptism to propose to the catechumens the faith in the Trinity of the divine persons. On the contrary, we must begin with an exposition of this mystery, and then it will be easier to go from there to the incarnation of the Son of God.... For myself, during the many years I have been engaged in teaching the pagans, I have not found anyone who objected to our faith with regard to the exposition of the incomprehensible mystery of the Trinity" (Histoire du Royaume, 130). In line with this method, de Rhodes divided his catechesis for baptism into eight days, the first four devoted to an exposition of the truths that can be known by reason, followed by a critique of the errors of non-Christian religions, and the second four to the exposition of the Christian truths, beginning with the Trinity, and not postponing it toward the end, shortly before baptism, as was done by his colleagues.

De Rhodes' exposition of the Trinity was deeply informed by the Thomistic synthesis, and in so far as this system has been shown to suffer from certain weaknesses, de Rhodes' trinitarian
theology is liable to the same criticism. Whatever the merits of his trinitarian theology, however, de Rhodes' methodology serves as a useful reminder that the doctrine of the Trinity must be given a central position in any comparative theology and must not be relegated to an appendix, as was done in liberal theology.

An Intercultural Theology in View of Mission

It is well known that Christian mission has been undergoing a crisis, in the sense of both danger and opportunity, since the end of the Second World War. David Bosch opens his magisterial work on mission with reflections on the various factors that have brought about a call for a moratorium in Christian mission. On the other hand, thanks especially to the Second Vatican Council, a new theology of mission has emerged in which the church is said to be missionary by its very nature, and hence each and every member of the People of God is deemed to have personal missionary responsibility. Furthermore, in this new theology of mission, the missionary task of the church is understood not primarily as church planting but holistically, comprising the proclamation of the Word (kerygma), witness (martyria), worship (leiturgia), fellowship (koinonia), and service (diakonia).

Yet, despite notable achievements in the theologies of liberation, inculturation, and interreligious dialogue in the intervening years, a lot of work still remains to be done. The question is whether a kind of "comparative theology" — or theology in view of mission or inter-cultural theology, in the context of this essay — should be attempted and if so, how. In a review of works in comparative theology from 1989 to 1995, Francis Clooney describes comparative theology as a constructive theology "distinguished by its sources and ways of proceeding, by its foundation in more than one tradition (although the comparativist remains rooted in one tradition) and by reflection which builds on that foundation, rather than simply on themes or by methods already articulated prior to the comparative practice. Comparative theology... is a theology deeply changed by its attention to the details of multiple religious and theological traditions, it is a theology that occurs truly only after comparison" (Clooney 1995:522). At the end of his review, Clooney highlights two facts: "comparative theologians are still finding out how to do their work properly, they have not agreed on a specific
thematic agenda; and the fruits of comparative work pertain to
every area of theology, they are not comfortably apportioned to one
corner of theological discourse. In the light of de Rhodes’
missionary practice, the following suggestions are put forward with
the hope to advance the discussion of both the nature and tasks of
comparative theology and the two issues mentioned by Clooney.

1. The importance and necessity of comparative theology is
rooted in the very nature of the Christian faith as a translatable
phenomenon. As Lamin Sanneh has argued, Christianity’s need to
translate out of Aramaic and Hebrew—what Andrew Walls calls
the “Translation Principle”—brought about a double result: relativ-
ization of its Judaic roots and destigmatization of Gentile culture,
now adopted as a natural extension of the life of the new religion.
The implicit theological principle behind the translation of the Bible
into the vernacular is the recognition that all cultures, and the
languages in which they are embodied, are equally worthy in God’s
eyes and therefore capable of bearing the divine message. Hence,
translatability functions as an antidote to cultural absolutism, be it
Hebrew, Greek, or Latin. Translatability is rooted in and at the same
time expands the radical pluralism inherent in Christianity. Because
of the translation principle, Christianity, differently from Judaism,
does not require incorporation into an ethnic community as a
condition for conversion to its faith: and unlike Islam, it does not
make becoming a Christian equivalent to being identified with a
particular culture, as “Islamicization” means “Arabization.” Also,
thanks to this “infinite translatability of the Christian faith” (Walls
1996:22), Christianity has been able to develop a fruitful dialogue
with different cultures.

A comparative theology will therefore begin with the task of
translation, from Western languages to other languages and vice
versa. Such a work by itself already enriches our understanding of
other religions since it forces us to distinguish between the message
and its linguistic vehicle, between meaning and form and makes us
compare the terms and concepts of the text to be translated with
those (perhaps non-existing) of the receptor language. In the
process, we may, as de Rhodes and many other missionaries did,
enrich the receptor language by introducing ancillary linguistic
tools such as alphabetization of these vernaculars, grammars,
dictionaries, and histories.
2. The translation and the subsequent comparison among religions to construct a comparative theology must not be limited to religious texts, however influential they may be in a particular culture. The methods of textual comparison that Clooney expounds—setting the comparison, finding similarities and differences, and reading by means of "coordination," "superimposition," "conversation," "tension," and "collage"—are very helpful indeed (Clooney 1993: 159-75). However, texts should be enlarged beyond the "classics" (e.g., the "Five Classics" and "Four Books" of Confucianism) to include folktales, stories, legends, dance, proverbs (especially for the Vietnamese).

Moreover, it is important and necessary, as de Rhodes has shown, to go beyond texts to religions as actually lived at the popular level to understand what these texts mean to people today. In so doing, in addition to gaining a better understanding of classical texts, comparative theology can avoid the charge of "archeologism," creating systems of thought of interest only to historians and antiquarians.

There is a further reason why one must go beyond the classical texts. These texts almost invariably represent certain interests, quite often those of the dominant social and religious classes (e.g., the caste system in India and the bias against women in Confucianism). Voices from the margins—economic, gender, racial, and cultural—have been silenced. To redress this injustice, attempts have been made to listen to the voices of indigenous minority people (such as the Ainu, Okinawans, Korean residents, and the Burakumin people in Japan), the Dalits and the tribal people in India, the oppressed mass (minjung) in Korea, and women in general (Sugirtharajah 1991, 1993, 1994). A comparative theology that neglects these voices not only is incomplete but also runs the risk of perpetuating the injustice committed against these marginalized people.

Connected with the suppressed voices are the alternative methods of doing theology and canons of scholarship. Of course, the methods of rational and analytical sciences developed in the West should not be abandoned in doing intercultural theology, but they must be complemented by the more intuitive and less academy-oriented methods of research and communication such as poetry, dance, art, meditation, oral transmission, and social action.

3. The question of truth, as Clooney has rightly argued, must be broached in comparative theology. Because comparative
theology is theology, the truth of its theological proposals must be evaluated. However, their truths cannot be quickly and easily determined, and Clooney's counsel for patience is well taken: "Only through a long and patient process of reading and rereading does a particular reader approach the point where even one of the contested theological truths is apprehended as superseding its texts and as becoming simply 'the truth'" (Clooney 1993: 192). The difficulty of deciding the truth of a text is further heightened when it is seen in relation to the practical effects it has produced on the moral and spiritual lives of the believers (the pragmatic criterion of truth). In this respect, de Rhodes' (as well as past missionaries) certitude about the superstitions of non-Christian religions appears rash and presumptuous. Against their negative attitude toward non-Christian religions, we may subscribe to the recent hypothesis proposed by Jacques Dupuis, that there is "a convergence between the religious traditions and the mystery of Jesus Christ, as representing various, though not equal paths along which, through history, God has sought and continues to seek human beings in his Word and his Spirit."52

Furthermore, truth in comparative theology must be seen, as Clooney acknowledges, in correlation with the issues such as the uniqueness and universality of Christ that are the subject-matter of the newly developed theological specialty known as "Theology of Religions" (Clooney 1993: 193-96). The theology of religions and comparative theology must not be seen as mutually exclusive, nor should there be a moratorium on the theology of religions until a satisfactory comparative theology has been achieved. On the contrary, the two theologies must be seen as adopting two mutually complementary approaches to the study of religion, the theology of religions the 'a priori,' and comparative theology the 'a posteriori,' and therefore should be performed in tandem, as Stephen Duffy has rightly argued (1999: 105-15).

4. Finally, there is the question of the order of theological doctrines in comparative theology. While it is legitimate to let the thematic agenda of comparative theology be determined by the texts and practices of a particular religious tradition under examination, it is necessary to ask how in an eventual systematic re-elaboration of Christian theology after comparison, which is the ultimate goal of comparative theology, the various doctrines are to
be related to one another. As we have seen, de Rhodes proposed the doctrine of the Trinity as a possible unifying theme.

Given the centrality of the Trinity in Christian faith, the recent emergence of the trinitarian doctrine into preeminence in contemporary theology, and above all, given the tripartite structure present in the belief systems of many Asian religions, it seems likely that it will be taken up as the unifying doctrine of future intercultural or cross-cultural theology. Meanwhile, of course, comparativists should pursue, according to his or her expertise and preference, the examination of any Christian doctrine and practice in the light of non-Christian religions and on the basis of this comparison, elaborate a new understanding of it.

The purpose of this essay is not to make de Rhodes into a comparativist theologian. He would be shocked to learn that he is one, for indeed, he would not even understand what the expression 'comparative theology' means, and were he to understand it, he would no doubt strenuously object to some of its goals and theological principles. More than three hundred years separated his world and ours, and the distance between him and us is unbridgeable in places.

In the age such as ours, in which the world is becoming more and more a "global village," and in which the survival of the human race and even of the planet depends on the collaboration of the followers of all religions, comparative theology (or intercultural theology, cross-cultural theology, contextual theology, ethnotheology, global theology, theology in the context of mission, or any other nomenclature) has become an urgent necessity. As theologians grope for the contours of this theology and attempt to construct it by trial and error, it would behoove them to recognize that they are not pioneers embarking upon an utterly new adventure in *terra incognita*. Humbly and gratefully, they should set out to learn from the wisdom and achievements of their predecessors—a Matteo Ricci, a Roberto di Nobili, an Alexandre de Rhodes—all the while courageously pointing out the shortcomings of these giants, just as their own successors will do the same to them.
NOTES

1. This is true not only of Western theologians but also of the so-called Third-World theologians who have to "unlearn" Western theologies once they come home and begin teaching theology to their own people. In Koyama 1999, the author spoke about his need to "reconstruct my theological knowledge in terms of my experience in Thailand" (174). Koyama, a Japanese, obtained his doctorate in theology from Princeton Theological Seminary, and later was a missionary in Thailand. He spoke of "a triple accommodation process with Tokyo, New Jersey, and Chengmai" (174).

2. Tracy argues that because of the pervasive religious pluralism in contemporary society "any theology in any tradition that takes religious pluralism seriously must eventually become comparative theology." See Tracy 1987:14.454, see also 1990.

3. Walsh 1999 has convincingly shown that Western culture has been and remains deeply Christian in spite of the repeated attempts by modernity and post-modernity to deny its Christian roots.

4. Kuhn 1970:10. Of course, in the postmodern era, with its foundation and its fundamental methodological presuppositions questioned and deconstructed, theology has lost this status of "normal science."

5. David Ng was reminded that there is no word in Chinese for 'community' when he went to the Chinese University of Hong Kong to study the Chinese and Confucian understandings of community. There is, however, the word tsien kai for koinonia. See 1999:102.

6. The debate about the use of the Chinese words t'ien, shang-ti, t'ien-chu, and t'ien-ti to translate God is well known. Of the four only t'ien-chu was ratified by Clement XI (Ex illa die) in 1715 and by Benedict XIV (Ex quo singulari) in 1742. See Phan 1998: 135. Note that the word "inappropriate" on the last line of this page should read "appropriate."

7. For example, the word 'Christ' has not been translated but transliterated in all Asian languages (of course, in all other languages as well). However, while 'Christ' does not sound strange in European languages (students sometimes think that it is Jesus' last name!), to Asian ears, it is a foreign product, just as Christianity. Moreover, to make matters worse, in many Asian countries, Catholics and Protestants have insisted on using two different sets of biblical and theological terms to translate or transliterate European terms!

8. One typical example is the dragon. Whereas in the Bible the dragon stands for the devil (e.g., Revelation), in Vietnam it is the symbol of divinity. According to the Vietnamese legend, the Vietnamese are said to descend from the dragon (the sea god) and a mountain goddess; they are said to be "con rong chau tien" (children of the dragon and the goddess). For more examples of cultural differences, see Kraft 1996 and Luzbetak 1988.

10. On the nature and tasks of comparative (or cross-cultural or intercultural) theology, see Clooney 1993, 1995:521-50 and 1996; Fredericks 1999. Clooney distinguishes three moments of comparative theology: comparison of the theologies of different religions (a discipline within the history of religions), comparisons tested by the posing of theological questions (a part of theology), and construction of theologies generated after and from comparative practice (the ultimate goal of comparative theology). Comparative theology is intimately connected, though not identical, with the elaboration of local theologies, inc ulturation, and missiology.

11. This essay is not as such a discussion of de Rhodes' missionary and theological achievements. For a study of de Rhodes, see Phan 1998.

12. See John Paul II 1990 no. 33. This triple division, though helpful, is not without difficulties of its own. For one thing, it gratuitously assumes that lacking "adequate and solid ecclesial structures" Christian communities are unable to "incarnate the faith in their own environment and proclaim it to other groups."


We possess a manuscript of this two-volume history written in Latin in Archivium Romanum Societatis Jesu, Jap.-Sin (henceforth, ARSI, JS), 83 and 84, f. 1-62v. It was composed in 1639 when de Rhodes was in Macao, teaching theology at the Madre de Deus College. It was published first in Italian in Rome in 1650 under the title Relazione De' felici successi della Santa Fede Predicata da Padri della Compagnia di Giesu nel regno di Tunchino, alla santità di N.S.PP Innocenzo decimo. Di Alessandro de Rhodes Atignomese in 326 pages. The Latin original was published last in Lyon in 1652 under the title Tunchinensis historiae libri duo, quorum altero status temporalis hujus Regni, altero mirabiles evangelicae prædicationis progressus referuntur. Coepitas per Patres Societatis Jesu, ab anno 1627, ad Annum 1646. Authore P. Alexandro de
Rhodes, Avenionensi, eiusdem Societatis Presbytero, Eorum quae hic narrantur teste oculto. Volume I has 89 pages, and Volume II, 200 pages. The last part of this work (chapters 37-51) describes the situation of the church in Tonkin until 1646, which means that it was not written in Macao in 1636 but later, possibly after the author had come back to Rome (June 27, 1649).

The second work is entitled *Divers voyages et missions du P. Alexandre de Rhodes en la Chine, & autres Royaumes de l'Orient. Avec son retour en Europe par la Perse & l'Arménie. Le tout divisé en trois parties.* Henceforth: *Divers voyages.* It was first published in Paris in 1651 and republished in 1666, 1681, 1683, 1854, and 1884. The book is composed of three parts. The first two parts are paginated continuously and have 276 pages. The third part begins with a new pagination. The book has been translated into German by Michael Pachtler (Freiburg: Herder. 1859) and into English by Solange Hertz (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press. 1966). We have a Latin manuscript, written in Macassar in June 4, 1647, entitled *Alexandri Rhodes e Societate Jesu terra marique decem annorum itinerarium.* It is located in ARSI, JS, f. 95r-140v. It contains 61 chapters, with chapters 50-58 and the last part of chapter 61 missing. This Latin manuscript forms the second part of *Divers voyages,* though the French printed text differs considerably from the Latin manuscript.

15. These books are a dictionary and a catechism. The dictionary is entitled *Dictionarium annamiticum, lusitanum, et latinum ope Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide in lucem editum ab Alexandro de Rhodes e Societate Jesu, ejusdemque Sacrae Congregationis Missionario Apostolico* (Rome, 1651). The dictionary is composed of three parts: the first part, with a separate pagination (31 pages) is an essay on Vietnamese grammar, entitled *Linguae Annamiticae seu Tunchinensis brevis declaratio;* the second part is the dictionary proper, entitled *Dictionarium Annamicum seu Tunchinense cum Lusitana, et Latina declaratione;* and the last part, unpagedinated, entitled *Index Latin sermonis,* is an index of Latin words followed by the numbers of the pages in which they occur in the second part.


17. For a full description of de Rhodes' mission in Vietnam, see Do Quang Chinh's dissertation. With regard to the political situation of Vietnam
in the 17th century, it is to be briefly noted that though there was a king of the Le dynasty, he was in fact nothing more than a puppet, and real power lay in the hands of two clans; the north, known to the West as Tonkin, was under the Trinh clan, and the center, known then as Cochinchina, under the Nguyen clan. Continuous warfare was conducted between the two rival clans for total control of the country with no definitive results. De Rhodes' entire ministry in Vietnam was carried out during this struggle for power between Tonkin and Cochinchina.

18. The other two residences were located at Hoi An and Nuoc Man (Qui Nhon).


20. This number is given by B. Roboredo in his report "Relação das perseguições da Missam de Cochinchina desde Dezembro de 1640 ate Abril de 1641," ARSI, JS 70, f. Ir. According to de Rhodes, the number is 12,000 (Divers voyages, 117).

21. For a history of Vietnamese Christianity in the seventeenth century, see Chappouille 1943 and Trong 1959.

22. In contrast to his colleagues Matteo Ricci in China and Roberto de Nobili in India, de Rhodes did not adopt the costumes of mandarins or the upper class. Furthermore, like Vietnamese men, he wore long hair, letting it fall freely in long braids on his shoulders, which he noted was the way the Vietnamese expressed their independence from the Chinese (Histoire du Royaume). Like most enthusiastic missionaries, de Rhodes took great pleasure in indigenous foods and cuisine. With genuine delight he described the taste of various Vietnamese fruits (Histoire du Royaume, 50) and native delicacies such as fish sauce and bird-nest soup (Histoire du Royaume, 48 and Divers voyages, 66). He enthusiastically endorsed tea as a remedy against headache, stomach troubles, and kidney complaints (Divers voyages, 45-53). He strongly recommended eating fish that have been swallowed by other fish cooked with pepper before sea travel - a native folk medicine - as an effective antidote against seasickness (Divers voyages, 124). He also praised Vietnamese traditional medicine (Divers voyages, 189-91).

23. Among the Vietnamese cultural practices that de Rhodes wanted to abolish is polygamy (Cathechismus, 77-78). Other practices he tried to modify, giving them a Christian meaning, such as swearing loyalty to the lord (Histoire du Royaume, 35-37) and the celebrations of the New Year (Histoire du Royaume, 105).

24. We will come back to these issues later in the essay.
25. De Rhodes had to adapt various Christian liturgical celebrations (e.g., Christmas, the feast of the Purification of Mary, and Palm Sunday) to the Vietnamese situation and to direct the organization of the Christian communities with the help of lay catechists. For an account of how de Rhodes dealt with all the issues mentioned so far, see Phan 1998: 69-106.

26. De Rhodes did not translate the Bible, but in his catechism he made use of the gospel according to John (almost exclusively) and so indirectly contributed to the translation of the Bible.

27. We are informed by de Rhodes that do Amaral composed a *Diccionário anamita-português-latin* and that Barbosa composed *Diccionário português-anamita*. De Rhodes acknowledged that he had relied on both dictionaries to compose his own. See *Dictionarium*, ad lectorem.

28. For a brief explanation of the *chu nho* and *chu nom*, See Phan 1998: 29-31. It is significant that the first missionaries made use of *chu nom* rather than the Chinese characters in composing catechisms and prayer books. One of them, Gerolamo Maiorca, an Italian Jesuit, wrote some forty books in this script. One reason for its use is that *chu nom*, being more widely known, would permit a more extensive communication with the Vietnamese. More significantly, the missionaries' preference for *chu nom* signaled their decision, in line with the Jesuits' (e.g., Alessandro Valignano) policy of inculturation, to keep the nascent Vietnamese Christian Church rooted in the native culture rather than in the foreign culture of which the Chinese characters were a potent symbol and instrument of expansion.

29. *Histoire du Royaume*, 129-30. All the translations of de Rhodes' works in this essay are mine.

30. The belief in *Ong Troi* is the basic element of the Vietnamese indigenous religion which consists essentially in the cult of "Heaven," the spirits, and the ancestors. At the head of the hierarchy of spirits, the Vietnamese place *Ong Troi*, above all deities, immortals, spirits, and genies. In this "Mr. Heaven" the Vietnamese see the personal, transcendent, benevolent, and just God, creator of the universe, source of life, and supreme judge. There is no cult of Heaven at the popular level; the rendering of cult to this God was reserved to the emperor who once a year (since the nineteenth century once every three years) offered a solemn sacrifice, known as *Tê Nam Giao*, in the name of the entire people. For the Vietnamese people's understanding of Heaven and their native religion, see Phan 1998: 24-8.

31. De Rhodes went to great lengths to show that "Heaven" is not divine but created. See *Cathechismus*, 12-16

32. For an explanation of this principle as a unified vision of reality, see Panikkar 1993.

33. For de Rhodes' translation of other Christian terms, see Phan 1998: 137-40. At times de Rhodes combined different Vietnamese words into
new ones; at other times, he used circumlocutions for technical terms such as hypostatic union; sometimes (though rarely), he left the foreign words untranslated. Most significant among the latter is Spiritus Sanctus in the baptismal formula. The reason he did not translate Spiritus Sanctus might be that the word spiritus (than) is associated in Vietnamese with angel or devil (see Dictionarium, col. 740-41 and 763), and the word Sanctus (thanh or thanh hien) is given in Vietnamese to Confucius (see Dictionarium, col. 747-48) to whom de Rhodes refused the title of saint (see Histoire du Royaume, 63-4 and Cathechismus, 113).

34. For a magisterial study of the development of contemporary theology of religions, see Dupuis 1997 and 1990.

35. Among Catholic theologians, inclusivism is associated with Karl Rahner, whereas pluralism is associated with Paul Knitter. Most contemporary theologians of religion are rightly dissatisfied with the usefulness of these categories as ways to describe possible Christian attitudes toward non-Christian religions. For a discussion of these two positions. See Phan 1994b and 1994c.

36. For de Rhodes' exposition of the "Three Religions" in China, see Divers voyages, 53-55. He discussed the Vietnamese religions mainly in Histoire du Royaume, 61-92; Divers voyages, 86-89; and Cathechismus, 104-24.

37. For a presentation of de Rhodes' attitudes toward the "Three Religions" and the Vietnamese indigenous religion, see Phan 1998: 82-96. In general, of the three religions, de Rhodes considered Taoism the crassest and the most pernicious because "it is the most widespread and the most devoted to the service of the devil" (Histoire de Royaume, 72). With regard to Buddhism, he followed the practice of his times summarized in the expression "Ch'in ju p'ai fo" that is, draw close to Confucianism and repudiate Buddhism. For him, the basic error of Buddhism is its atheism. Finally, de Rhodes held Confucianism in highest esteem because of its moral teachings: "Confucius, in the books we have received from him, gives proper instructions to form good morals" (Histoire de Royaume, 62). He acknowledged that there is harmony between certain Confucian and Christian teachings on law, politics, and the administration of justice. In these matters, "there is nothing contrary to the principles of the Christian religion that should be rejected or condemned by those who follow them" (Histoire de Royaume, 63).

38. Among the common truths that can be established by reason de Rhodes cited the belief in the creation of the world, the purpose of human life, and the moral obligation to know and serve God (Histoire du Royaume, 175-76). Elsewhere he confessed: "My favorite method was to propose to them [the non-Christians] the immortality of the soul and the afterlife. From thence I went on to prove God's existence and providence" (Divers voyages, 96).
39. In his debates with Vietnamese Confucian scholars and Buddhist monks, de Rhodes often sought the help of those converts of his who had obtained the doctoral degree or had functioned as mandarins.

40. The Vietnamese do not possess philosophical and religious classics as the Chinese (e.g. the Confucian canon). Instead, the main source of Vietnamese philosophy is constituted by Vietnamese mythologies, legends, works of literature, and especially, proverbs and sayings.

41. For a history of this issue, see Minamiki 1985 and for reflections on the implications of the veneration of ancestors for the Church of Asia today, see Jacques 1999.

42. For de Rhodes’ description of the cult of Confucius in Tonkin, see Histoire du Royaume, 64-65; for his description of funerals and celebrations of death anniversaries, see Histoire du Royaume, 89. It is interesting to note that Lépold Cadière (1869 1955), a missionary to Vietnam and probably the greatest anthropologist on matters Vietnamese, agreed with de Rhodes, on the basis of over fifty years of living with and observing the Vietnamese: “Such a theory [that the veneration of ancestors is not religious] is in total contradiction with what can be seen every single day in Vietnam ... For the immense majority of the Vietnamese, the ancestors continue to be part of the family and the cult rendered them is clearly religious.” See 1944: 39. My translation.


44. For an exposition of de Rhodes’ trinitarian theology, especially his contributions to the Vietnamese theological language, see Phan 1998: 175-8.

45. For a critique of the Thomistic trinitarian synthesis, see LaCugna 1991: 143-69. For a feminist critique, see Johnson 1993.

46. For a discussion of how the doctrine of the Trinity must occupy a central position in systematics and impart unity to the exposition of the Christian faith, see Phan 1998c: 125-45.

47. Bosch 1991: 3-4, mentions the worldwide process of secularization, the dechristianization of the West, religious pluralism, the sense of the guilt among Western missionaries, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, and the maturity of the churches in the Third World. Louis Luzbetak (1988: 106-9) mentions the rapid rise and growth of independent and pentecostal churches, the development of liberation and other local theologies, the spread of base communities, the rise of new ministries, the continuing strength of popular religiosity, theological pluralism, and ecumenical and interreligious understanding and collaboration.

49. Walls 1996: 25, sees translation into the vernacular as the linguistic consequence of the Incarnation.
50. See Sanneh, Translating the Message, 1. He goes on to say: "Missionary adoption of the vernacular, therefore, was tantamount to adopting indigenous cultural criteria for the message, a piece of radical indigenization far greater than the standard portrayal of mission as Western cultural imperialism" (3).

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