Toward a More Profound Reciprocity: The Conversation between Ignatian Spirituality and Vietnamese Culture

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Regis College and the Pastoral Department of the Toronto School of Theology in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Theology awarded by Regis College and the University of Toronto

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Abstract

Should we take the Ignatian method of discernment for granted? Should we hold the view that anyone who is willing to go through such a process will be able to discern the way that St. Ignatius describes in his Spiritual Exercises? And when we hear a question such as “Do you discern as an American or a Vietnamese?” should we look at the questioner as if he or she is out of his or her mind?

In reality, we at times have a tendency to hold the view that Ignatian discernment may not be influenced by ethnic factors because its focal point is not our ethnicity or even decision-making. Rather, it is about deepening our relationship with God, appreciating the gifts that God has given us, and discovering how we may respond to that love in daily life. Perhaps, because of this mentality, we often think that, despite our cultural differences, we can discern according to the Ignatian method as long as we are willing. We even fall into the trap of seeing cultural variance as a minor factor rather than a potential impediment. We then fail to recognize that many people (especially those who live in Vietnam) struggle when they attempt to use the Ignatian method. Sometimes these people enter into the process just for the sake of formality, and they let their cultural values (e.g., collective tendency, obedience, filial piety, or high respect for authority) trump the whole process. Other times, they have to
discern not as the true Vietnamese but as Westerners. It is legitimate for us to wonder whether they can have an authentic Ignatian discernment and whether they can be who they are when discerning.

This thesis asserts that, on the one hand, people can still discern authentically the way that Ignatius describes in the *Spiritual Exercises*, and on the other hand, they can turn the potential impediments within their cultural values into an opportunity for enrichment. The thesis also suggests that instead of letting cultural values be stumbling blocks, people can transform them into beneficial additives to sweeten the fruit of their discernment. In order to achieve this goal, this dissertation points out that there is a need for a mutually enriched dialogue between Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture on the question of discernment and obedience. There is also a need for Ignatian spirituality to be inculturated into the culture of Vietnam. Such an inculturation will help the Vietnamese to maintain the core values of their own culture, and at the same time not turn the Ignatian method of discernment into something that is totally different.
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### ABBREVIATIONS

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<tr>
<td>AMDG</td>
<td><em>Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam</em> (For the Greater Glory of God)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autobiog</td>
<td>Autobiography of St. Ignatius of Loyola</td>
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<tr>
<td>CN</td>
<td><em>Complementary Norms of the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Const.</td>
<td><em>Constitutions of the Society of Jesus</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>DHCJ</td>
<td><em>Diccionario Histórico de la Compañía de Jesús</em> (Historical Dictionary of The Society of Jesus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EA</td>
<td>Ecclesia in Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examen</td>
<td>General Examination of the Constitutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FABC</td>
<td>Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GC</td>
<td>General Congregation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IHSI</td>
<td><em>Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISPCK</td>
<td>Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.E.P</td>
<td>Société des Missions étrangères de Paris (Paris Foreign Missions Society)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MI</td>
<td><em>Monumenta Ignatiana</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MHSI</td>
<td><em>Monumenta Historica Societatis Iesu</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sp.Diar.</td>
<td>The <em>Spiritual Diary of St. Ignatius</em>, 1544-1545</td>
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<tr>
<td>S.J.</td>
<td>Society of Jesus</td>
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Introduction

People of many faith traditions manifest a desire to enter into a discernment process to find God’s will and distinguish it from merely human inclination.¹ In the pursuit of the will of God, each person may have different personal imperatives and use different methods. Some methods focus heavily on theory while others pay more attention to praxis. Neither emphasis alone, however, will help them in the long run, because an overemphasis on theory may destroy the spirit of being a human, and an overemphasis on experience may impoverish human understanding and creativity. Hence, there is a need to seek a more balanced approach.

Ignatian spirituality in general and its discernment method in particular tries to achieve such a balance. Nevertheless, as Gideon Goosen points out, everything in life, even the concept of truth, is culturally conditioned.² Ignatian spirituality with its discernment method is no exception. Because of this, it is legitimate to ask how and to what extent Ignatian spirituality influences and is influenced by the various cultures with which it interacts. How does this spirituality inculturate in, and dialogue with, non-Western cultures such as that of Vietnam? Will this process be a one-way imposition, i.e., entering into a local culture, challenging and transforming it so as to make it another form of Western Christianity? Alternatively, will it be a reciprocal process where both parties have a chance to interact, challenge, and enrich each other? Can Ignatian spirituality find a way to adopt some

¹ Christianity, for instance, advises its followers to deepen their relationship with God through Christ. It encourages people to imitate Jesus in a journey to find and fulfill the will of the Father so that the Father’s name can be glorified on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:9). The Islamic faith also places God at its center. In fact, the term “Islam” itself means “a total voluntary submission to God and His will.” See Barnard Lewis et al., Islam: The Religion and The People (New Jersey: Wharton School Publishing, 2009), 8. Taoism, in its turn, emphasizes the need to seek and follow the path of the Tao so as to have a peaceful life. See Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching, translated by Ngọc T. Vũ (Hồ Chí Minh: NXB Tổng Hợp Tp. Hồ Chí Minh, 2011), 87 and 101–102.

local traditions and yet not lose its own strength and authenticity? Can people reinterpret this spirituality using a lens or language that appears to be totally foreign to its original form? What will be the outcome? Will it be a better form or simply a confusing syncretic mix? This dissertation will address these questions.

1. Thesis statement

This thesis asserts that it is possible to have a mutually enriched dialogue between Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture on the questions of discernment and obedience.

2. Historical context of Christianity in Vietnam

In March 1553, a Westerner named “Inekhu” (Ignatius) came to North Vietnam (known at that time as Tonkin) to preach the “Giatô” (Christian) religion. However, the fruit of his mission was short-lived. After Inekhu’s time, many Dominican and Franciscan missionaries from Malacca and Manila came to Vietnam. Their missionary enterprises were sporadic and unorganized, and their activities left no noticeable trace except for a few conversions. Only with the arrival of the Jesuit missionaries from Macau in the early seventeenth century did the Christian mission in Vietnam become consolidated.

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4 On 18 January 1615, three Jesuits from Macau landed in Cửa Hân, Đà Nẵng. Two priests, Francisco Buzomi and Diogo Carvalho, as well as a brother, came to visit the Japanese Catholics who had taken refuge in South Vietnam (known at that time as Cochinchina) to escape the persecution led by the Togukawa shogunate. Little did they know that they were the first among many Jesuits who would establish the foundation for the second largest Christian community in Southeast Asia.

A few notes on these first missionaries: Francesco Buzomi (1576–1639) was born in Napoli, Italy. He joined the Jesuits in 1592 and was ordained in 1606. He departed for Asia in 1609 and was sent to Cochinchina in 1615. He left Cochinchina in 1638 and died in Macau a year later. Diogo Carvalho (1578–1624) was born in Coimbra, Portugal. He joined the Jesuits in 1594 and departed for Asia in 1600. He arrived in Macau in 1601, was ordained in 1609 and was a missionary to Japan from 1609 to 1614. He was in Cochinchina from 1615 to 1616 and returned to Japan, where he died as a martyr in Sendai on 22 February 1624. He was beatified on July 7, 1867. Nothing much is known about the brother. See Diccionario Histórico de la Compañía de Jesús (DHCJ), Vol 1 (Rome: IHSI-UPComillas, 2001), 586 and 671.
Indeed, from 1615 to 1659, most missionary work in Vietnam was carried out by the Jesuits, of whom the most famous was Alexandre de Rhodes (1593–1660). By the end of 1627, more than 1,200 people were baptized and became Catholics. Around May 1630, the number of Christians had grown to 5,600. Ten years later, with the help of the native catechists, this number increased to 100,000. This figure steadily increased and around the end of the 1800’s, there were about 320,000 Catholics in three Vicariates: East Tonkin, West Tonkin, and Cochinchina. By the early twentieth century, the number of Christians in Vietnam had reached nearly one million. At the beginning of September 2015, there were about 6.6 million Catholics in Vietnam. Despite this steady growth, the number of Catholics in Vietnam has always been insignificant amidst the broader populace, and the Church itself has faced many stumbling blocks.

From the very beginning, because of a misinterpretation of the term, local people equated Christianity with “Đạo Hoa Lang,” which means “religion of the Portuguese.” Consequently, many people were afraid of becoming Christian because they thought that if they did, they would have no choice but to deny their Vietnamese identity. To make matters worse, many missionaries (except de Rhodes and a few Jesuits) could neither speak the local language nor understand its traditions. They often misinterpreted Vietnamese ways of thinking and living, viewed them as unsuitable to the Christian faith, and zealously wanted to prohibit or remove them.

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7 Some examples of traditions rejected by these missionaries included showing respect to the ancestors (e.g., bowing in front of the ancestral tablets or placing flowers, food and incense on the altar of the deceased); having more than one wife; and accepting others’ faith practices as their own.
This overzealousness and misunderstanding led the local people to suspect that the actual desire of these missionaries was not to preach a new religion, but to work for the benefit of their own country and extend its influence in Vietnam. In other words, these evangelizers came to Vietnam not to assist but to upset the unity of the country and destroy the fabric of Vietnamese society. If that was the case, then the Christian religion had to be an evil one. Based on this logic, civil leaders and simple people alike began to view this religion as “Già tô tà đạo” (false Christian religion). Since it was a false religion, those who followed it would be judged as those who were not faithful to their gods, their country, their kings, and their ancestors. Hence, although the number of Catholics (as of September 2015) has grown to 6.6 million, this number only constitutes 6.7 percent of the population.

Given the small percentage of the population who are Christians, it is reasonable to ask a few questions. What has happened in the past 463 years, counting from the day Christianity first interacted with Vietnam through Inekhu’s arrival in 1553? Why is it that

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8 Chính Q. Đỗ, S.J., Hòa Minh Vào Xã Hộ Việt Nam (Inculturate into the Vietnamese Society) (Frisco, Texas: Antôn & Đuốc Sáng, 2007), 10ff.

This accusation might have been groundless and unfair in the beginning. However, from the early eighteenth century onwards, local people became convinced that it was true. They did not see much difference between evangelization and colonialization because there was a close relationship between the missionaries and colonialists. To ensure the success of the mission, missionaries cooperated with and used the power of the colonial authority. More often than not, missionaries also received financial help from the colonial government. To realize their expansive dreams, the colonial governments counted on the faithfulness of missionaries who came from their motherlands and relied on their intelligent information. Nevertheless, both sides, to a certain extent, did not hesitate to manipulate each other to achieve their goals. For instance, the colonial forces used religious freedom as an excuse for their military intervention and often did so with the help of the information received from the missionaries. On the other side, the missionaries routinely exaggerated the need for having a protectoral government and many times misinformed the colonial government about the reality of Vietnam. Many missionaries at that time fell into a trap of trying to carry out two duties at once: preaching the Gospel and fighting for the benefit of their motherlands. It became so common that leaders of the Catholic Church had to raise some concerns. Pope Pius XI in his Apostolic Letter Ab Ipsis Pontificatus Primordis (June 19, 1926) reminded the missionaries that they were not the ambassadors of any earthly authority but God. Their duties, therefore, were not to serve their own motherlands but to serve God and work for the salvation of human souls. See Thuận H. Cao, Les Missionnaires et La Politique Coloniale Française au Viêt Nam (1857–1914), translated into Vietnamese as Giáo Sĩ Thừa Sai và Chính Sách Thương Độ của Pháp Tại Việt Nam (1857–1914) by Thuận Nguyễn (Hồ Chí Minh: Công Ty Sách Phương Nam, 2014), 22 and 30ff.

9 This figure is much higher than that of the Christians in Asia. According to the newest Statistical Yearbook of the Church (2015), the Catholics in Asia constitute only 3.2 percent of its population. See http://ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/vatican-statistics-show-modest-steady-church-growth-worldwide, accessed on September 15, 2015.
Christianity is still a minority faith in this country? What are the reasons behind the fact that Christianity cannot knit itself into the fabric of Vietnamese society? Among other reasons, one can identify major persecutions that took place in the late seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. One can talk about the tensions between missionaries of various religious orders, especially the Jesuits, the Dominicans, and the M.E.P (Missions étrangères de Paris). One can also pinpoint a close connection between the colonial government and the missionaries. Given this, one can suspect that these persecutions and tensions and the unhealthy connection between government personnel and missionaries played a role in restricting the growth of the Church in Vietnam. Will this be enough to explain the root cause of this reality of Christianity in Vietnam?

If one pays close attention to the reasons the civil authority (e.g., the Nguyễn) gave for imposing a negative approach toward Christianity—the ways missionaries acted in Vietnam, the causes of tension that existed among the missionaries, and the justification that Western countries such as France asserted when they invaded Vietnam— one can surmise the underlying causes. These include a lack of understanding and miscommunication among missionaries and between both Western and Eastern cultures. This lack of understanding and miscommunication, this thesis asserts, was the real cause of the phenomena mentioned above, and was a huge stumbling block that even now needs to be removed. The best way to overcome this stumbling block is to engage in dialogue, listening and learning from one another. This task requires a recognition of the imperative need for an enriched dialogue of mutual respect and reciprocal learning.

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10 The justification that Western countries (e.g., France) often used was that it was necessary to protect the Christians and to civilize this barbarian country. According to them, Asian countries in general and Vietnam in particular were still uncivilized, and hence they needed to be transformed. See Thuân H. Cao, *Les Missionnaires et La Politique Coloniale Française au Viet Nam*, 53ff.
3. **Significance of the thesis topic**

This thesis is significant because, in the history of the Society of Jesus, there is no record of a dialogue between Ignatian spirituality and a non-Western culture that was mutually enriching. This is especially true in Asia, and because of this dissonance, mistrust continues to exist. The participants at the Thirty-fourth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus acknowledged this difficulty and were aware of the fact that “many committed Christians in Asia still feel a split between their Asian cultural experience and the still-Western character of what they experience in the Church,” which makes them feel at odds with their own culture.\(^{11}\) Perhaps this has also happened because many Jesuits who worked in Asia unconsciously forgot that inculturation is a practice that has its roots in the earliest days of the history of the Christian Church. The sensitivity to cultural differences in St. Paul’s view regarding new converts\(^ {12}\) or the use of Greek philosophical thought to explain some Christian concepts are examples of such a practice in the earliest days of the history of the Christian Church.\(^ {13}\)


Reflecting on the history of the mission of the Society of Jesus throughout the world, especially in Asia, Decree 4 of the Thirty-Fourth General Congregation (GC 34) points out four critical mistakes that Jesuit missionaries often made. Some Jesuit missionaries had adopted manipulative tactics that contributed to the alienation of the people they served (GC 34, Decree 4, No. 91–92). Other Jesuit missionaries failed to insert themselves into the heart of a culture and remained a foreign presence (GC 34, Decree 4, No. 93). Many others failed to discover the treasures of humanity, their values, depth, and the transcendence of other cultures, which manifest the action of the Holy Spirit (GC 34, Decree 4, No. 94). Still others came with their Western “high culture” mentality and had a tendency to look down on the indigenous cultures, or even allowed those cultures to be destroyed (GC 34, Decree 4, No. 95).

\(^{12}\) Chapter 15 of the Acts of the Apostles and chapter 12 of St. Paul’s letter to the Galatians present a narrative about the issue. On the one side, James and his followers insisted that the Gentiles should be circumcised and instructed to keep the prescriptions of the law of Moses. On the other side, Paul believed there was no such necessity. The leading Apostles at the First Council of Jerusalem discussed the issue and came to the agreement that the only requirement for the new Christians was to abstain from food polluted by idols and from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals, and from blood. This decision was a vital one because it marked the break between Christianity and the Jewish faith.

In his *Sống Đạo Với Phương Đông (The Eastern Way of Living Faith)*, Quý Hoàng, S.J., a Vietnamese historical theologian, startles readers with a simple scenario. Let us imagine that at the First Council of Jerusalem, Paul failed to convince James and other authorities to reach a compromise, and that the final decree of the Council had insisted on making the Mosaic laws and the Jewish tradition prerequisites for becoming Christians. “If this had happened, within a relatively short time, would Christianity have had any chance to carry its message throughout the Roman Empire and even to India?”

Hoàng wonders.

Given the fact that the practice of inculturating the faith into a foreign culture had already taken place from the very beginning, and that Paul was willing not to impose the Mosaic laws and Jewish tradition when he was in a culture that was different from his own, it is legitimate to ask whether later missionaries should have hesitated to follow suit by leaving behind their Western traditions and practices when they were in Asia. In other words, should they accept this process and understand that inculturation is a key ingredient responsible for the success and failure of their mission and the future of the Church?

One is not alone in raising this question. A document of the International Theological Commission deals with the issue of cultural pluralism from a missionary perspective, related to the evangelization of peoples. It declares that, from time to time, the events and words revealed by God must be rethought, reformulated and lived differently within each culture. It also reminds readers that “Pope John Paul II has taken to heart the evangelization of cultures,

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and in the Pope’s view, the dialogue between the Church and cultures assumes a vital
importance for the future of the Church and the world.\footnote{15}

In the multicultural world of today, there is a need to study in depth the relationship
between religions and cultures. This need is particularly acute in Asia, where the concepts of
religion and faith cannot be fully understood if one attempts to separate them from the
culture in which they are found. Peter Phan explicates this point in one of his books:

In Asia, religion is generally understood as a way of life. The Vietnamese word for
religion is “đạo,” meaning path, road, or way. Of course, belief (creed), worship and
prayer (cult), ethical norm (code), and common, especially monastic, life with an
authoritative hierarchy (community) are by no means absent in Asian religions. But
they form significant parts of Asian religions only in so far as they promote a way of
life leading to a full flourishing of humanity (Confucianism), union with the cosmos
(Taoism), liberation from suffering (Buddhism), or a total submission to God’s will
(Islam). As a way of life, these religions are deeply intertwined with and inseparable
from Asian cultures. In a sense, culture is the outward manifestation of religion, and
religion is the depth dimension of culture. The one cannot be understood apart from
the other.\footnote{16}

The inseparability of religion and culture, thus, is a reality not to be taken lightly. A
profound comprehension of this relationship is necessary for a better understanding of the
depth of an individual’s tradition and perhaps of the quintessence of traditions belonging to
various peoples. Such an understanding will lead to an appreciation of the richness of each
tradition on the one hand, and, on the other hand, an openness to embrace the opportunity to
exchange ideas, clarify misconceptions and gain enrichment when possible.

When Jesuit missionaries came to Vietnam, they came with a desire to spread the
Good News. The method used to carry out this mission reflected their commitment to their
Ignatian formation. Their view on how to discern and follow God’s will, how to find God in

\footnote{15} International Theological Commission, *Faith and Inculturation* (1988), No. 4. Taken from
http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1988_fede-

all things, and how to place God at the center of all human activities was unique. This view caught the attention of the Vietnamese because it was also part of their cultural practice. But unlike some other areas in America and Oceania, where the social structure was still in a tribal form, Vietnam had already for thousands of years been a nation with a unique and advanced structure. Its civilization, ways of thinking and practices, had been built upon a solid foundation. De Rhodes in his *History of the Kingdom of Tonkin* spent many chapters describing this phenomenon and expressed his admiration for such a civilization.\(^{17}\)

Of course, there were differences and tensions in the engagement between the Jesuit missionaries and the local people, and thus, both sides at times tended to feel discouraged and even thought of the differences as unsurpassable barriers.\(^{18}\) These differences and tensions, however, are not necessarily negative. They can help both sides to broaden their understanding and avoid being imprisoned by an exclusive attitude. In fact, if the Vietnamese and the Jesuits know how to listen and reciprocally learn from one another, those very differences and tensions can extend their horizon and hope.

### 4. Methodology

This section includes an introduction to the literature used, an overview of the method utilized, and concrete steps describing how this methodology unfolds.

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\(^{17}\) From chapters 1 to 31, de Rhodes presents a detailed description of the local culture and expresses his admiration for its civilization. He even portrays some aspects of the Vietnamese culture (e.g., filial piety, respect for authority, longing for harmony, strong communal bond, or preference for the communal over the individual) as superior to those of his own culture. See Alexandre de Rhodes, S.J., *Lịch Sử Vương Quốc Đàng Ngoài* (*The History of the Kingdom of Tonkin*), trans. Xuyên K. Nguyễn (Sài Gòn: Tủ Sách Đại Kê, 1994).

\(^{18}\) For instance, the Jesuit missionaries advised the Vietnamese converts to keep a clear distance from their idolatrous past, and if possible, to reveal that intention publicly. Many local new converts took this advice seriously. They sent away their concubines and publicly destroyed pictures and statues of local gods. Their actions created much tension between Christianity and other religions, and indirectly destroyed the communal harmony. As a result, An Đô Vương, the Lord of Cochinchina (South of Vietnam), had to discuss the following plan with his advisers: “If I do not destroy this new religion, it will expand quickly and continue to spread out its poisonous ideas, which will lead to the collapse of my kingdom. Hence, I must prevent its development to restore order in this country.” See Chính Đỗ, S.J., *Đồng Tên Trong Xã Hội Đại Việt 1615–1773* (*Society of Jesus in the Vietnamese Society 1615–1773*) (Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà Sách Độc Bà Hòa Bình, 2008), 398.
4.1. Literature review

The literature used in this dissertation will be taken from two sources. The first source comes from the spiritual writings of Ignatius of Loyola, and other related materials, and the second from Vietnamese texts. Concerning the first source, the thesis relies on the writings of Ignatius, the historical accounts of Jesuits, their works and missions in non-Western countries such as China, India, and Vietnam, the documents of the Society of Jesus, and other relevant materials written by contemporary authors. From this literature, the thesis concentrates on Ignatian spirituality, its focus on discerning God’s will and the relationship between discernment and obedience. It also explores a historical account of the works of Jesuit missionaries in Vietnam during the seventeenth century and the way they developed their missions and were inculturated into that culture.19

Concerning the second source, the thesis uses Vietnamese religious and cultural literature, specifying ways of thinking and living, and the relationship to the Creator and other creatures. Some of these texts also give readers a vivid picture of how the Vietnamese people respond to religions that come from outside their culture, the relationship between those faiths (e.g., among Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism and between these religions and Christianity), and their views on discernment, obedience, mission, and inculturation. Some works describing the teachings of Confucius, Laozi, and Gautama Buddha will also be consulted. The rationale behind the use of this literature is threefold: first, to give an

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19The dissertation focuses on this period because, although the Jesuits began their mission in Vietnam as early as 1615 (with the coming of an Italian Jesuit, Francesco Buzomi, S.J., at Cửa Hàn), their mission in that country ended when Pope Clement XIV (1769–1774) suppressed the Society of Jesus with the brief Dominus ac Redemptor (1773). The Jesuits decided to stay away from Vietnam even after the restoration of the Order, which took place through the papal bull Sollicitudo Omnium Ecclesiarum, issued in 1814 by Pope Pius VII (1800–1823). In 1957, the government and the Bishops’ Conference of Vietnam officially invited them back. The Jesuit mission in Vietnam resumed and bore much fruit until the end of the Vietnam War (April 1975). In 1976, the communist government expelled all foreign Jesuits from Vietnam. Shortly after, the government put many local Jesuits in prison and kept them there until as late as the 1990s. The Jesuit mission was thus reduced to a minimum. Only after 1992 could their apostolic work return to a relatively normal state of affairs.
overview of the values that helped to form and are esteemed by Vietnamese people; second, to explain why Christianity still appears to be foreign to that culture; and third, to point out opportunities people can take to overcome obstacles caused by miscommunication, misunderstanding, lack of dialogue, lack of genuine inculturation, and/or overzealousness.

4.2. An overview of the method utilized

In order to support critical engagement and an enriched dialogue between Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture, this thesis will use a contextual, comparative, and correlational approach to interpret the literature considered. By placing the Ignatian view of discernment and obedience, for example, in juxtaposition with that of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, one can have a better understanding of how these two worldviews interact with each other in the context of Vietnam. One can also better analyze their differences and similarities, recognize potential sources of conflict, and compare the Western and Eastern ways of interpreting cultures to see if there is room for common ground that can help both sides to flourish. Most likely, these common grounds, David Tracy points out, will constitute “the right places for discussing our differences.”

By bringing into consideration the works of Jesuit missionaries in a particular context (e.g., seventeenth-century Vietnam), this thesis evaluates how well those Jesuit missionaries were inculturated into the local culture and whether they made any progress over the years. It also attempts to identify the remaining areas that need attention, and to study different forms of dialogue to see what would be most

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20 David Tracy reminds us that when we try to interpret a particular tradition or culture we need to be aware that our interpretation may be very different from that of others, and that every tradition must eventually acknowledge its own plurality and ambiguity. Hence, Tracy asserts: “It is important to wonder whether we have any evidence that our conversation partner could accept and whether we can find those commonplaces. For without such places, we may retreat into announcement arising from our intuitive sense. And if that is the case, we may be right, but no one else, in principle, will ever know or accept it.” The intended dialogue at that point will face the risk of becoming a monologue instead. See David Tracy, Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987), 25.
appropriate. By trying to understand the correlation between Ignatian and Vietnamese ways of thinking and practice, one realizes that to attend to the other as other and the different as different is also to understand the different as possible. One also realizes that pluralism is one possible response to the fact of religious plurality, and that fundamental trust and friendship among conversation partners can bear fruit when there is both critique and even, when appropriate, suspicion. Indeed, as David Tracy asserts, “a friendship, without critique and appropriate suspicion, is a friendship barely removed from the polite and wary communication of strangers.”

4.3. Methodology

In concrete terms, the methodology of this thesis will include the following steps. The first step is to present a historical account of the works of Jesuits in Vietnam during the seventeenth century: how they carried out their mission and tried to inculcate into the culture of Vietnam, and how they understood and engaged this culture. The thesis will also present some tensions that arose between de Rhodes and the local community, and attempt to analyze the reasons for these conflicts.

The second step is to present an account of Vietnamese culture. With the assistance of Kỷ Trương’s and Peter Phan’s works, this step will focus on describing how the Vietnamese think of and act on maintaining a harmonious relationship between God, self, and others. It will also explain the influences of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism on the cultural and religious life of the Vietnamese people, and analyze the origin of the differences between the Western and Eastern ways of thinking and living.

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21 Ibid., 112.
22 This sub-section only describes the methodology of this thesis by pointing out how a contextual, comparative, and correlational approach helps me to interpret the literature considered. In the next section, however, I will present the way the thesis evolves over five chapters and the layout of each chapter.
From this historical and cultural foundation, the third step will involve a discussion of the concept of discernment and its relationship to obedience according to the Ignatian and Vietnamese views. Using a comparative approach, this dissertation will identify the similarities and differences between these two positions. For example, the ultimate purpose of a process of discernment is to seek and follow the will of God. On this, both sides agree. Nevertheless, while the Ignatian method places the human relationship with God through Christ in the center of the process, the Vietnamese method focuses on the harmony that exists within the community. To the Vietnamese, God is the most significant figure; however, in the process of discernment, they only implicitly acknowledge the importance of God’s will and His presence, while explicitly paying attention to His peace in the form of communal harmony. This happens because Asian people in general and the Vietnamese in particular tend to embrace the *via negativa* rather than the *via positiva*. To them, as pointed out in *Tao Te Ching*, the God that can be explicitly discussed is not the true God (*Đạo đạo phi thường đạo*).²³

Moreover, as Peter Phan points out, Vietnamese culture is strongly influenced by Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Some features such as filial piety, respect for authority, longing for harmony, and preference for the communal over the individual are unique to that culture. But these characteristics may become impediments disrupting the process of discernment if one attempts to use an Ignatian method of discernment.²⁴ By comparing both approaches (the Ignatian approach used by Jesuit missionaries and that of the

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²³ See Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, 42.
²⁴ I will elaborate on this phenomenon and analyze the reasons for such a difficulty in the fourth chapter. In doing so, I attempt to elucidate the relationship between discernment and culture and the way they shape each other.
Vietnamese), the thesis will explore the tensions between them, the need to have a healthy dialogue, and the possibility of mutually enriching each other through such a conversation.

As Francis Clooney indicates, the comparative approach is not about pointing out which one is better or replacing one by another. Rather, it is about learning from other traditions in significant detail while remaining committed to one tradition; and it is about having wider knowledge and being more tolerant and objective. Thus, the fourth step will go beyond a mere comparison of differences and similarities and enter into a reflective and contemplative endeavor. This step will explore on the one hand whether core values can be kept intact (and whether those core values will be in conflict with those of others), and, on the other hand, whether they can be enriched by the values learned or adopted from other traditions.

This thesis will therefore proceed to a fourth step in detailing the conversation between Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture as they move toward a more profound reciprocity in this area of discernment and obedience. More specifically, it will focus on the positive correlation between Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture and thereby identify possibilities of compatibilities behind their differences. This step will go deeper into the engagement between these two parties by choosing one particular mode of the Vietnamese way of proceeding, namely that of the Taoist tradition. We will reflect on how this method helps Vietnamese culture and Ignatian spirituality challenge, complement, and enrich each other in a life-giving reciprocity.

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26 In Vietnam, people sometimes rely on the Taoist, Confucianist, or Buddhist tradition to discern. Other times, they do so by using the insights learned from all three traditions. More often than not, the Vietnamese people are neither concerned much about which method they use nor the distinctions between them. This does not mean that the three methods are identical. In fact, each of them is rather unique. For example, Taoism focuses on detachment, non-action, and non-contrivance. Confucianism pays special attention to self-
5. **Procedure**

This thesis develops over five chapters. The first chapter sets the historical context for the life of St. Ignatius, the foundation of the Society of Jesus, and the Jesuits—both their spirituality and mission, and their encounter with other cultures. It reminds the reader that an attempt to enter into and dialogue with various cultures has its roots in the desire for adaptation that inspired Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus. This chapter indicates how that desire unfolded and evolved in the context of seventeenth-century Vietnam. It presents examples of the works of Jesuit missionaries in China, India, and Vietnam, and from these examples, the chapter will explore some tensions and issues still remaining.

Chapter 2 deals with Vietnamese culture. Its first part will provide an overview of Vietnamese history and culture. The second part will examine how these factors influence the way Vietnamese people think, act, and believe. The next portion will study Kỳ Trưởng’s theory that the roots of difficulties can be analyzed by discussing the significant differences between Western and Eastern ways of thinking and practice. From this foundation, the chapter will explain how those differences had widespread influence and were responsible for many successes or failures of the Jesuit missionaries who tried to be inculturated into Vietnamese culture in the past. Finally, this chapter will identify some clear obstacles that need to be addressed.

The third chapter discusses the concept of Ignatian discernment and its relationship to obedience. It offers an overview of the process and explores its goal and theological foundations.
Chapter 4 studies the Vietnamese way of discernment and obedience, both the advantages and disadvantages. It also explains why obedience can be an obstacle to the whole process if a Vietnamese person attempts to discern according to the Ignatian method. Finally, the chapter will identify some tensions between the Western and Eastern methods of discerning and ponder the possibility of having an authentic Ignatian discernment in a true Vietnamese context.

The fifth chapter will deepen the study of the engagement between Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture. It will show how these two entities might contribute, challenge, and transform each other in a life-giving reciprocity. Based on this foundation, the chapter will revisit the areas of discernment and obedience through the lens of an Asian model introduced by Lao Tzu and elaborated by Quý Hoàng, a Vietnamese Jesuit philosopher. It will study and examine this model to see if it can be a helpful tool assisting both sides to develop a better way of dialoging.

In conclusion, this thesis will recapture the importance of the inculturation of modern Christianity in a non-Western culture. Such a process calls for a continuous discernment of the ways one should think and act in other cultures. Finally, the thesis will present implications that will contribute to an academic understanding of inculturation in missionary work—both its methods and its purposes.

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27 To a certain extent, Chapter 5 is a further elaboration of the fourth chapter. I choose to do so to maintain a reasonable length for each chapter.

28 The Taoist tradition puts a great emphasis on detachment, non-action (wu-wei) and non-contrivance. Such an approach can be observed in the way the water flows. Based on this observation, Lao Tzu advised people to discern, act, and live well according to the behavior of the water, and in so doing, he insisted, they would find peace. See Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching, 54 and 175. Quý Hoàng, a Jesuit philosopher, in his turn, carefully studied Lao Tzu’s Water Path model. He then elaborated it so as to make it fit the Vietnamese setting. See Quý S. Hoàng, S.J., Thánh Học Thiêng Liêng (Sacred Theology) (Hồ Chí Minh: Tòa TGM Tp. Hồ Chí Minh, 1997), 78ff.
Chapter One: Historical Context

The Jesuits – Their Spirituality and Mission and Their Encounters with Other Cultures

Decree 3 of the Thirty-fifth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus asserts:

“The service of faith in Jesus Christ and the promotion of the justice of the Kingdom preached by Him can best be achieved in the contemporary world if inculturation and dialogue become essential elements of our ways of proceeding in mission.”

This assertion, on the one hand, affirms the importance of inculturation and dialogue in the mission of the Jesuits. On the other hand, although the Society of Jesus has begun to use the term “inculturation” in its official documents only in recent times, members of this religious order did not wait until the Thirty-fifth General Congregation to recognize its significance. In fact, Jesuit attempts to enter into dialogue with various cultures have roots in the desire for adaptation that inspired Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Order.

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2 The 35th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus was held in Rome from Jan 7 to March 6, 2008. The term “inculturation” represents a model of contextualizing theology and is of recent origin—although it is not without precedent in Christian history. According to David Bosch, “it was Joseph Masson who first coined the phrase Catholicisme inculturé (inculturated Catholicism) in 1962. It soon gained currency among Jesuits, in the form of ‘inculturation.’ In 1977, Pedro Arrupe, the General Superior of the Society of Jesus, introduced the term to the Synod of Bishops; the Apostolic Exhortation, Catechesi Tradendae (CT), which flowed from this Synod, took it up and gave it universal popularity. It was soon accepted in Protestant circles and is today one of the most widely used concepts in missiological circles.” See David J. Bosch, Transforming Mission (New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 458.

Prior to Arrupe’s introducing the term to the Synod of Bishops, the word “inculturation” had already appeared in one document of the 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, which was held in Rome from December 2, 1974 to March 7, 1975. Decree 5 of this Congregation declared: “The 32nd General Congregation is aware of the great importance that must be given today to the work involving inculturation of both faith and Christian life in all the continents of the world, but especially in the regions of Asia and Africa and in some countries of Latin America. Mindful that from its very beginning the Society has had a long and venerable missionary tradition of promoting inculturation, the Congregation judges that this work must be pursued with even greater determination in our own day and that it deserves the progressively greater concern and attention of the whole Society.” See Society of Jesus, Jesuit Life and Mission Today, ed. John W. Padberg, S.J., GC 32, Decree 5, No. 131.
This first chapter, therefore, will begin with an overview of Ignatius’ life, which will provide a better understanding of the foundation of the Society of Jesus, and the development of Ignatian Spirituality. The latter part of the chapter will focus on the engagement between this spirituality and other cultures, with examples from Jesuits who adaptively carried out their spirituality in non-Western countries such as China, India, and Vietnam. Through such examples, one can recognize the commonality among Jesuit missions in Asia, their tensions and hopes, and their results and remaining issues.

1. **Ignatius of Loyola: an overview of his life**

Ignatius of Loyola was born into a noble family in the mountainous Basque region of northern Spain on October 23, 1491. Up to the age of twenty-six, Ignatius admitted, “he was a man given to the follies of the world [and had] a great and foolish desire to win fame.” In 1521, when trying to defend the Spanish border fortress of Pamplona, Ignatius was injured and was captured by the French. His French captors, however, treated him with courtesy and kindness. They even carried him on a litter across Spain to his family at Loyola where he began a long period of recuperation.

In the course of his convalescence, Ignatius was so bored that he asked his family to give him some books of fiction to read. His family could only give him *De Vita Christi* (*The Life of Christ*) by Ludolph of Saxony and *Flos Sanctorum* (*The Lives of The Saints*) by Jacobo de Voragine because they were the only books available in Loyola at that time. Ignatius read these books several times and, occasionally, he set them aside and let his thoughts wander—imagining himself either as a knight attending a great lady or as a person imitating the heroic actions of the saints in serving God. He began to notice that these

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thoughts evoked different reactions in him. Thoughts of himself as a knight, though delightful while they lasted, ultimately led him to dryness and dissatisfaction. Thoughts of following the example of great saints or going to Jerusalem barefoot, on the contrary, brought him “a joy that lasted even after the thoughts had ended.”

In the beginning, Ignatius neither noticed nor stopped to ponder the distinction between those reactions until the time “when his eyes were opened a little, and he began to marvel at the difference and to reflect upon it.” He recognized that one set of thoughts was directed toward God and presumably had its origin in Him, whereas the other was not. He also realized that there were two contrary spirits—the spirit of God and the spirit of evil—that were at work in him. These spirits were communicating not only in his experiences but also in his affective responses to the ordinary events of his life. This realization marked the starting point of a process of discernment of spirits, which he later developed into “Rules for the Discernment of Spirits” in his *Spiritual Exercises*.

What was crucial here was not anything that Ignatius did during his time of recovery, but rather something that was happening to him. Ignatius recognized that God was actively at work in him: God invited, guided, directed and disposed Ignatius for the way in which he might best serve God. This recognition was significant because it helped Ignatius to see the need for converting and placing God at the center of his life.

Although his wounds were not completely healed, Ignatius still traveled across Spain to the Benedictine monastery of Montserrat in late February 1522. On his way to this monastery, Ignatius decided to undertake some penances that the saints had practiced. These penances, he afterward disclosed, “were only external works [and he performed them]”

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4 Ibid., 7–9.
5 Ibid.
without considering any more particular prospect or looking to any interior thing.” Ignatius kept reflecting on his actions and was aware of their shortcomings. He later corrected them by promoting a spirituality that sought for a balanced position rather than an extreme asceticism. Ignatius stayed in Montserrat a few months and then moved to Manresa.

During the first four months at Manresa, Ignatius went through a period of tranquility and unending joy. Such a period, however, was replaced by a time of aridity and sadness. He started to question his new way of life and had a constant anxiety about sins that he may have failed to confess. He tried to fight off these doubts and scruples and sought help everywhere but could not find any relief. Suddenly, Ignatius awoke “as from sleep” and saw his scruples for what they were – simply lies. He was freed from their power at last. This experience brought Ignatius face-to-face with his deficiency and inability to attain his spiritual healing. He then realized that God had revealed to him his human fragility so as to help him to understand and accept that the all-surpassing power of God resided in God alone.

When Ignatius’ spiritual peacefulness returned, he enjoyed many consolations and received great illuminations concerning the Trinity, the creation of the world, the humanity of Christ, and the Eucharistic sacramental presence. The most significant illumination among them occurred at a church near the Cardoner River (which was about a mile from Manresa). As described in *A Pilgrim’s Statement*, while Ignatius was sitting down with his face toward the river, “the eyes of his understanding began to be opened; not that he saw any vision, but he understood and learned many things, both spiritual matters and matters of faith and of scholarship.” The experience was so overwhelming that Ignatius seemed to be a new man.

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6 Ibid., 21.
7 Ibid., 33–38.
8 Ibid., 42–43.
with a new intellect. He reflected on this experience as well as many others and integrated them later into his *Spiritual Exercises* and spirituality.

Note that during these experiences, he was very open and responded generously to God, not out of fear, but out of an inner freedom that was rooted in humility. He let God totally teach and lead him.\(^9\) Through these experiences, Ignatius came to understand that God was actively at work in his life as well as in the lives of all people. This insight became the premise underlying his *Spiritual Exercises* and was expressed in the fifteenth of its preliminary notes: “It is more appropriate and far better that the Creator and Lord should communicate Himself [directly] to the devout soul, embracing it in love and praise, and disposing for the way which will enable the soul to serve Him better in the future.”\(^10\)

Because the desire of making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem was strong in him, Ignatius began to make plans to carry it out. In February of 1523, he left Manresa for Barcelona to find passage to the Italian coast and from there to the Holy Land.\(^11\) On September 4, 1523, Ignatius arrived in Jerusalem. He began to explore the Holy City. He felt great consolation on visiting various places in this city and had a firm intention to remain there to help souls. His plan to stay, however, was foiled by the Franciscan custodians and their Provincial, who perceived such a strong-willed pilgrim as a liability.

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\(^9\) This inner freedom lies at the root of what Ignatius calls “indifference.” It is important for us to remember that indifference according to the Ignatian tradition does not mean having no feeling or no emotion about things. Rather, it means staying in balance with regard to everything around us, so that we can acquire an attitude of being open and ready to heed the call of the Lord whatever it may be.


An understanding that God is actively at work in all people’s lives, and that it is God’s nature to deal directly with the creature, opens a window of opportunity for dialogue between people of different faiths and cultures. Perhaps it explains why early Jesuits embraced adaptation as one of their approaches and tended to interpret other faiths and cultures through a relatively positive lens. The latter part of this chapter will present some examples of such a phenomenon.

Steadfast in his intention, Ignatius shared with the Franciscan Provincial that he would not abandon his plan to stay in Jerusalem unless such an act would lead him to sin. To this, the Provincial replied that the Franciscans had authority from the Apostolic See to keep or expel anyone from Jerusalem. They also had the power to excommunicate anyone who disobeyed their orders. The Provincial was willing to show Ignatius the bulls giving them such power if need be. Although his desire was still present, Ignatius respectfully obeyed the Provincial.  

The story mentioned above sheds light on Ignatius’ view of obedience. On the one hand, he did not interpret obedience as an act to do whatever the authority commanded without dialogue. Nor did he embrace an attitude of doing only what he wanted. On the other hand, his obedience reflected a deep reverence for the will of God and those whom God placed in authority (the Franciscan Provincial in this case). The main reason for obedience, therefore, was not about the command itself but God and His will.

Given his willingness to obey God and those whom God placed in authority, Ignatius left Jerusalem for Europe and arrived in Venice in mid-January of 1524. During this time, he kept thinking about what he would do next. It appeared to him that it was God’s will that he should not stay in Jerusalem. Nonetheless, he still wanted to help souls and realized that he would be able to do so better if he had proper knowledge. Thus, he decided to go to Barcelona to study Latin grammar.

After two years of studying Latin, Ignatius left Barcelona for Alcalá in 1526. While studying in Alcalá, Ignatius engaged in giving the Spiritual Exercises and teaching Christian

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12 Ignatius of Loyola, *A Pilgrim’s Testament*, 62. The Franciscans could keep or expel people from Jerusalem, but not simply because of their power. Rather, this was a common injunction at that time so as to protect the pilgrims from being captured and ransomed.

13 Ibid., 70.
doctrine to those who were interested. His activities reached the ears of the inquisitors at Toledo, who began to investigate to see whether there were errors in his teachings. In the end, the inquisitors did not find any blunder, and hence, they passed the matter to the Vicar General, Juan Rodríguez Figueroa. Although there was no mistake in his teachings, Figueroa still ordered Ignatius to dye his clothes and wear shoes instead of going barefoot. He also prohibited Ignatius from speaking about matters of faith until he had studied for four more years. Ignatius had no problem with obeying the first two commands, though he thought they would not bring benefit to anyone. The last order, however, closed the door for him to help souls. Hence, he decided to put the case before Alonso III Fonseca, the Archbishop of Toledo, who in turn advised him to go and study at a college in Salamanca. Ignatius took this advice and went there to study in 1527.\(^\text{14}\)

At Salamanca, Ignatius ran into trouble with the Dominican friars, who suspected that his view might be heretical and that he might be a follower of Desiderius Erasmus.\(^\text{15}\) The friars kept him in jail for 22 days, during which time they examined his life and *Spiritual Exercises* and questioned him about theological matters such as the Trinity and the Eucharist. In the end, they did not find any fault in his life or teaching. Hence, they suggested that he could continue to do what he was doing so long as he restrained himself from defining matters related to sin (e.g., whether a particular sin was venial or mortal), until he had spent

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\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 84–91.  
\(^\text{15}\) Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536) was a Dutch Renaissance humanist, priest, social critic, teacher, and theologian. He remained a member of the Roman Catholic Church all his life and was committed to reforming the Church and its clerics’ abuses from within. Unlike other reformers who rejected the authority of the Pope, Erasmus accepted this authority. Nonetheless, he did not hesitate to deride Pope Julius II (1503–1513) and accuse him of corruption. He also argued that the corrupt clergy reduced religious ceremonies to mere habits and that the Church made matters worse by creating so many complicated dogmas. Hence, he advocated for a middle way in which he emphasized the need to return to the primary source, which was the story of Christ in the Scriptures; to imitate Christ and have a deep respect for traditional faith, piety, and grace; and to reject Luther’s emphasis on faith alone. This approach disappointed some authorities in the Roman Catholic Church because they viewed his actions as a failure to sacrifice himself in defense of the Church. See Manfred Hoffmann, “Faith and Piety in Erasmus’ Thought,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* (1989), vol. 20, no. 2 (1989), 241–258.
four years in further studies. Although Ignatius did not agree with their verdict, he did what they ordered. Yet he understood that a door to help souls was closed by this command, and consequently, he made a decision to leave Salamanca to study in Paris in February 1528.\(^\text{16}\)

In Paris, he gathered a group of friends and invited them to participate in prayer and meditation according to his *Spiritual Exercises*. He and his companions shared many things in common. They loved to pray, fast, and do penance and works of charity. They also desired to go to Jerusalem and spend their lives there for the good of souls. They even agreed that if, after a year, they could not go to Jerusalem or obtain permission to stay there, they would return to Rome and present themselves to the Pope so that “he could make use of them wherever he thought it would be more for the glory of God and the good of souls.”\(^\text{17}\) With this agreement, Ignatius and his friends visited Rome to obtain Paul III’s blessing for their trip to Jerusalem in 1537. The trip, however, did not occur because the Venetians had broken off diplomatic relations with the Turks, and as a consequence, no ship sailed to the East that year. Ignatius and a few representatives of his group headed back to Rome and presented themselves to the Pope.

2. **The establishment of the Society of Jesus**

When the desire to go to Jerusalem to serve Christ could not be realized, the first companions had to decide what to do next. They shared so much in common that they did not want to dissolve the group. They recognized the need to form a more lasting association. What could it be? Would all the members of the group join an existing order? Alternatively, could it be that they should form a new one? The first option seemed feasible; however, their

\(^{16}\) Ignatius of Loyola, *A Pilgrim’s Testament*, 97ff.
\(^{17}\) Ibid., 120–121. This is the origin of the Jesuits’ concept of obeying the Vicar of Christ in matters related to the mission, as described in their later unique fourth vow.
ways of thinking and living were very different from those of any other order. Moreover, it was not easy to find an order that was not already tainted by the unpraiseworthy lives and corruption of the clerics. The second option was thus preferable, yet there was little possibility of establishing a new order because the Church at that time was not willing to accept new religious orders.

By the time Pope Paul III (1534–1549) was elected, the Catholic Church had already entered into a period rife with uncertainties and deep divisions. On the one hand, the corruption within the Church showed no sign of ending. A majority of bishops and priests continued to live unpraiseworthy lives. On the other hand, the Protestant Reformation spread throughout Europe and received steady support from various political leaders. Facing this phenomenon, the Church had two options: either to dialogue with the reformers in the hope of reconciling and reuniting the Christian Church or to fight against them. In the beginning, the Church tried to dialogue with the reformers. Nevertheless, when such an effort failed, the Church had no choice but to enter into a counter-reformation process.

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18 Many spiritual leaders at the end of the sixteenth century paid more attention to personal and earthly gain than to reforming the Church. Alexandre VI (1492–1503), for instance, set many bad examples. He fathered several children by his mistresses, endowed his relatives at the Church’s and his neighbors’ expense, and made his seventeen-year-old son Archbishop of Valencia. Julius II (1503–1513) focused more on protecting the land of the Papal States than serving the spiritual needs of the people. Leo X (1513–1521) loved art and science more than anything else. Even Paul III (1534–1549), a great supporter of the Jesuits, lived a notably dissolute life. When he was a young cleric, he took for himself a mistress and had three sons and two daughters with her. Bishops were not any better. Although there were some good and holy bishops, the majority lived lavish lives and were involved too much in politics. The priests were equally depraved. Many were unworthy of their calling and were not prepared well to be spiritual leaders. See Sinh Đ. Bùi, O.P., *The History of The Catholic Church*, Vol. II (Orange County: Asian Printing 2001), 4–8.

Indeed, the Church at that time was quite corrupt. Christians everywhere struggled with heavy burdens. They had to pay for baptism, confession, holy orders, marriage, or even communion. Many people tried to find ways to change this situation. Martin Luther and his followers, for example, chose to leave the Church and formed a new reformed one. Ignatius and his companions, on the contrary, tried to reform it from within. They encouraged people to amend their lives by following the example of Christ: to live a poor and simple life as Jesus did, to seek nothing but God’s will, and to do nothing except what would glorify God. With such an approach and desire, it is no wonder that they did not want to join other religious orders but formed a new one instead. See Joseph F. Conwell, S.J., *Impelling Spirit*, 68.

19 For example, on 12 October 1518, the papal legate Cardinal Thomas Cajetan had a meeting with Martin Luther at Augsburg. At this meeting, Cardinal Cajetan tried to persuade the latter to recant his view in
Searching for a good strategy to counter the Reformation, Paul III saw a window of opportunity in a group of men who offered their services to him and lived such exemplary lives. Attending a number of theological disputationsthe Pope was impressed by their knowledge and saw the use that could be made of them to serve the counter-reformation. The Pope knew that they wanted to go to Jerusalem and serve Christ by converting the Muslims. He was also aware of the influence of the *Spiritual Exercises* and how each member of the group used these exercises to help others to amend their lives. He suggested that the companions could just as well help souls where they were—Rome could be their Jerusalem. With that suggestion, the Pope sent a signal to the companions that he was willing to let them form a new religious order, even though this was contrary to the practice of the Church at that time.20

With such papal approval, it became important to consider the future of this small group. A group discernment process was initiated from the middle of March 1539 to late June of the same year. In this discernment, they reflected on two fundamental questions. First, would it be better for them “to offer and dedicate [their] lives to Christ and His Vicar on earth [and] to be bound and joined in one body—a religious order”? Second, since they had already taken the vows of chastity and poverty,21 would it be better for them to take the

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20 This signal was substantial because as early as the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), the Church had already decided not to allow anyone to form a new religious order because she already had too many. See John W. O’Malley, S.J., *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 35.

21 This event took place in Venice on the feast of the Assumption of Mary, 15 August 1534, when the first seven companions (i.e., Ignatius, Francis Xavier, Diego Laínez, Alfonso Salmerón, Nicolás Bobadilla, Simão Rodrigues, and Pierre Favre) decided to make private vows of chastity and poverty. See John W. O’Malley, S.J., *The First Jesuits*, 32.
third vow, i.e., “to obey one person among the group [so that they might] fulfill the will of God in all things and carry out what God wants with all [their] will, intellect, and ability?”

These two crucial questions indicated that from the beginning, the Society of Jesus was founded on the basis of discernment and of having an obedient relationship with God, His Vicar on earth, and one another through a leader chosen among themselves. On 24 June 1539, they concluded their discernment and decided to form a new religious order.

The idea of establishing a new religious order, abolishing communal prayer in choir, and making a vow to obey the Pope concerning missions was not an idea that the papal curia would approve. The curia in fact raised strong objections. Fortunately, with the support of Cardinal Gasparo Contarini, Pope Paul III affirmed the first draft of the *Formula of the Institute* on September 27, 1540, making the establishment of the Society of Jesus official. A year later the companions elected Ignatius to be the first General Superior.

This Society developed and spread quickly. From a group of ten people in 1540, the Order expanded to include, by the time Ignatius died in 1556, twelve provinces in four continents with a little more than a thousand Jesuits whose cultural background was very diverse. With this fast growth and diversity, the Society of Jesus had many opportunities to interact with various cultures, but its founder had to find ways to maintain the unity of the Order and at the same time accommodate the differences among its members. One way to make this task possible was to have an honest *conversatio*, which, according to Ignatius, is

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23 Cardinal Gasparo Contarini (1483–1542) was an Italian diplomat and Bishop of Belluno. In April 1536, Pope Paul III appointed him to be the presider of a commission to devise ways for a reformation. As the Pope himself, Contarini also recognized a window of opportunity in Ignatius and his friends. He believed that these companions would work hard to assist him in searching for ways to reform the Church from within. See “Gasparo Contarini,” *Catholic Encyclopedia*, [http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04323c.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04323c.htm), accessed on January 25, 2016.
24 John W. O’Malley, S.J., *The First Jesuits*, 54. Those provinces were Italy (except for Rome), Sicily, Upper Germany, Lower Germany, France, Aragon, Castile, Andalusia, Portugal, Brazil, India, and Ethiopia.
more than just a mere conversation. It is “a way of acting, being or dealing with people, [and] a way to live out the true meaning of being the Compañía, a term that comes from the Latin *cum* [with] + *panis* [bread]: those, [who despite their differences], will share the same bread, common purpose, life, and aspiration.”\(^{25}\) In addition to this *conversatio*, each member of the Society would contribute to the success of the task by grounding themselves in God through prayer, learning how to adapt to new situations, and accepting people for who they were.

The idea of grounding oneself in the Lord through prayer and placing God at the center of everything was emphasized in the “Principle and Foundation”: “One is created to praise, reverence, and serve the Lord” and “one should seek only things that are more conducive to that end.”\(^{26}\) The advice to adapt and to meet people where they are also appears at the beginning of the *Spiritual Exercises*: “These exercises should be adapted to the disposition of the persons who desire to make them, that is, their age, education, and ability.”\(^{27}\) In all contemplations in the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius invites people to enter into a composition of places, putting themselves into an environment that fits the narrative of the biblical story on the one hand and is compatible with their *cultural background* on the other hand. This invitation does not mean that Ignatius wants people to rewrite the Scriptures for their personal taste. Rather, he wants them to feel comfortable with who they are and use their whole being to receive a deep message that God wants to give them in their prayer. In other words, he offers people a method of using *cultural categories* familiar to them so that they can interpret, understand, and discern their experiences of God. Finally, in a letter sent to Jesuits who were about to leave for Germany, Ignatius wrote: “It will be useful to


\(^{26}\) *Sp. Ex.* #23.

\(^{27}\) *Sp. Ex.* #18.
understand people’s characters and customs [italics added], and to anticipate possible reactions in various circumstances, especially in more critical issues.”

These examples demonstrate that the practice of inculturation within the Society of Jesus can be traced back to Ignatius of Loyola, its founder. Because of this practice and because of the attraction of its spirituality, men from different parts of the world were interested in and eventually decided to join this new religious order.

3. Some key characteristics of Ignatian spirituality

The first key characteristic is to see life and the universe as a gift calling forth wonder and gratefulness. It reminds people that they are created, accepted, and unconditionally loved by God and that God called them to a life of union with Him. According to Ignatius, the best way to respond to God and His gift is to follow, obey, and be at the disposal of Christ, even if that means to be rated as worthless and a fool for Him, or even if it means offering everything back to God including one’s liberty, memory, understanding, and will. This response is not driven by fear but by the gratuitous love of God, a love that evokes in one a desire to reciprocate whole-heartedly.

The second important feature of Ignatian spirituality is a call to enter into prayer with the whole person (using imagination and emotion as well as intellect). In the contemplation on the Nativity, for instance, Ignatius invites those engaged in contemplation to imagine a composition of places so as to see Mary, Joseph, and Jesus in person. He invites exercitants to gaze at the Holy Family, to observe what they do, to listen to what they say, to serve them.

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29 Sp. Ex. #167 and #234.
30 This loving relationship and wholehearted response became an inspiration for Ignatius. It led him to design the third vow (i.e., obedience) for the Jesuits—a vow that requires a free and total submission of both action and will, not by our own coercion, but by love.
if need be, to contemplate them with deep respect and reverence, and to draw some benefits from them. Finally, he asks them to enter into a colloquy with the Lord.\textsuperscript{31}

The point of this contemplation is not to get caught up in the imagination but to use it so as to have a holistic experience in prayer. Such a holistic experience will assist one in reflecting on the mystery of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, and thereby in not being deaf to His call. This type of prayer eventually becomes a tool to assist one in discerning the will of God and following it with an obedient heart. The prayer can also play the role of a reminder that each person has a unique history, culture, and customs, and that this person can bring all of these elements into consideration so as to encounter God fully. With such a reminder, this person, in turn, will not try to discourage his or her dialogue partners from being who they are. Nor will he or she attempt to prevent others from bringing what is important to them (e.g., cultural values or religious ideals) into the conversation.

A third key element is to be open to finding God in all things. In the second week of the \textit{Spiritual Exercises}, for example, Ignatius selects scriptural passages in such a way that each passage always reflects the mystery of the life of Christ: He is incarnated into the world; He calls His disciples despite their humble origins and shortcomings; He teaches the ordinary people, heals the sick, feeds the crowds, and raises the dead. The purpose of these meditations is to assist people in recognizing God’s presence in all moments of their lives. This acknowledgment leads them to the realization that God does not hold Himself aloof from creation but actively works in the world and all human lives, and that they are invited to place God at the center of their lives so as to ground themselves firmly in Him. When one realizes that the Lord continues to labor in this world and all human lives, one will be open to encountering God in others whose faiths and cultures are different from one’s own. One then

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Sp.Ex.} #110–117.
can be open to accepting them as they are and entering into a dialogue with them with a humble attitude.

The next characteristic is an awareness of personal sin and social evil. This awareness encourages one not to stop short at the evil structures of the existing world or the destruction caused by sin but rather to focus on the God who always loves and redeems. Awareness is fostered by meditations on sin—the first sin (of the angels), the second sin (of Adam and Eve), the third sin (of other human beings) and their own personal sins—and on God’s forgiveness and redemption. Through these meditations, one can understand that one is nothing but a sinner who is in need of God’s love and mercy, and that one should not acquire an arrogant attitude, i.e., seeing oneself as better than others. One can then encounter God with a deep sense of gratitude and humility, which in turn assists one to enter into dialogue with others with respect, honesty, and modesty. With the help of this demeanor, one can put the best interpretation on each circumstance and not dismiss other people too quickly without knowing the reason underlying their thoughts and actions.

The fifth feature of Ignatian spirituality emphasizes freedom (especially inner freedom), the need for discernment, and the requirement of responsible action. This feature invites one to be aware that the elements of freedom, discernment, and responsible action are not only important to oneself but also to all other human beings. Such awareness will challenge one to respect the way other people respond to God’s call and the way they practice their faith according to their cultural tradition. It also reminds one that the Holy Spirit will always work directly with each person. Hence, one should not stand in His way, but rather try to treat others with care and be as flexible and adaptable as possible.

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Another key element is a call to develop a personal love for Jesus, which expresses itself in a commitment to work as His companion and to continue His mission in the world for the good of other people. In the meditation on “The Call of the King,” Ignatius invites people to gaze, love, and be centered upon Jesus, whose mission is “to conquer the world and all [His] enemies,” and to glorify the Father by obeying His will. In fact, God desires all people to continue this mission on earth through the act of “offering [themselves] wholeheartedly to the service of the eternal King in bearing all injuries and affronts.”

All actions of the Jesuits are to be guided by these characteristics. To a certain extent, these features have become the lodestars for the mission of the Society. For every mission in which the Society of Jesus wants to involve itself, it must pass the test of whether it is what God wants, and whether it glorifies God’s name. When a Jesuit is sent to a new place whose culture is different from his own, he is asked to discern, find ways to adapt to, and be aware of God’s presence in the culture with which he is to interact. Pedro Arrupe, the twenty-eighth Superior General (1965–1983) of the Society of Jesus, reminds his Jesuit brothers that this Order was founded for the service of Christ through the service of all humankind. Thus, the Order “must discover, at each instant of time, each new encounter with the changing world, how it can best adapt and harness itself to human needs.” Indeed, the Society must engage in a dialogue with other cultures and pay attention to how well it carries out this task.

4. The engagement between Ignatian spirituality and other cultures

4.1. The first Jesuit generation: its encounter with other cultures

From the beginning, cultural diversity was at the heart of the Society of Jesus. For example, the first ten Jesuits were from different cultures: Ignatius of Loyola, Francis Xavier,

33 Sp. Ex. #91–100.
Diego Laínez, Alfonso Salmerón, and Nicolás Bobadilla from Spain; Simão Rodrigues from Portugal; Pierre Favre and Claude Jay from the Duchy of Savoy; Jean Codure and Paschase Broêt from France. Shortly after the Society was founded, men from all over Europe joined the order. Within 16 years, its members increased to more than a thousand persons who came not only from different countries and cultures but also from diverse social strata. Their ways of living, customs, and views of life were distinct. Hence, tensions at times occurred. Despite these inevitable frictions, the Jesuits were proud that persons from various cultural backgrounds could live and work together in a common cause.\textsuperscript{35} Not only were the Jesuits able to do such a thing among themselves, but they could also apply their ways of proceeding to the interactions between themselves and those whom they served.

What was the thing that helped these men live and work with each other in harmony? The answer could be that in addition to the Order’s military-like structure,\textsuperscript{36} which provided order, Ignatian spirituality played a significant role as well. Features of Ignatian spirituality, such as focusing on the end goal which is God, being flexible and adaptable, trying to put the best interpretation on each circumstance, or being reflective and discerning, assisted them in the process of seeking God in other people and recognizing the opportunities that underlay differences. Would this process and opportunity be realized in a non-European setting? The answer seemed ambiguous.

Indeed, even before the approval of the Order (27 September 1540), Jesuits began to go out to the entire world and proclaim the Good News, not only in Western but also in non-Western nations as far as India, Japan, and Brazil. In March 1540, Paul III asked Ignatius to send two Jesuits to India. In response to the Pope’s request, Ignatius initially chose Simão


\textsuperscript{36} All Jesuits are asked to be disciplined and to follow the order of their superiors. In fact, obedience is a non-negotiable requirement for each member of this religious order.
Rodrigues and Nicolás Bobadilla. At the last moment, however, Ignatius asked Francis Xavier to go in Bobadilla’s place because Bobadilla became seriously ill.\(^{37}\)

On May 6, 1542, after thirteen months of traveling, Xavier finally arrived in Goa. He began his mission among the Tamils through interpreters at first. Very soon, he realized that without a willingness to embrace an accommodative approach on his part, his mission would fail miserably. The basic content of his approach was, Xavier emphasized, “not only [to] learn to speak native tongues, but also learn to read and write native languages.”\(^{38}\)

From Goa, Francis Xavier extended his mission to Malacca (Spring 1545), Maluku (1546), and finally Japan (1549). It was in Japan that Xavier learned a lesson from his engagement with the local culture: the adaptation to Japanese culture had to begin even with the way he dressed. As a person who took the vow of poverty and desired to live a poor life as Jesus did, Xavier wore old and simple clothes. The Japanese people ignored his message, because, to them, there was nothing good they could get from a poor person. He adjusted his approach and began to dress luxuriously. With this adaptation, his mission was altered. Lord Ouchi Yoshitaka happily welcomed Xavier and allowed him to preach freely within Yamaguchi.

If the changing of clothes led Xavier to a degree of success, the content of his teaching and his lack of understanding of a culture that viewed filial piety as a required virtue caused him serious problems. The Japanese believed that filial piety was a mandate from God that they had to obey. When they heard Xavier insist that those who were not baptized before their death would go straight to hell, since there was no salvation without baptism,  


Simão Rodrigues eventually did not go to India with Francis Xavier but was sent to Portugal instead.  

\(^{38}\) John D. Young, 《East-West Synthesis: Mateo Ricci and Confucianism》 (Hong Kong: Center of Asian Studies University of Hong Kong, 1980), 2–3.
they were extremely disappointed. Many wondered why they could not be with their parents and be saved at the same time. Some Japanese even thought that it would be better for them to go to hell and be with their ancestors to fulfill their filial duty, than to go to heaven and be away from them. Others fell into a deep confusion, for they did not know what to do with the tension that existed between the two choices. First, according to Xavier, they should receive baptism so that they might be saved, even if it meant letting go of an opportunity to reunite with their ancestors. Alternatively, they should obey God’s command to practice filial piety as taught by their ancestors, though this would mean they remain non-Christian. The issue that the Japanese faced was not simply whether they should convert to Christianity. Rather, it was how to discern the meaning of the two seemingly contradictory commands given by the same God: to follow Him by becoming Catholic and to keep His rule of filial piety according to their cultural norms (i.e., to serve and respect the ancestors even after their death).

Xavier’s efforts to adapt to Japanese culture had mixed results. He genuinely tried to be flexible and adaptable. This was not the case in other parts of the world. According to John Young, “there was never a consensus on a policy of accommodation among the Jesuits in the history of their Order. Jesuits either chose total adaptation or a limited concession to native cultures.” Because of this, although they tried to accommodate the local culture, their efforts were not always consistent.


39 The question why they could not be reunited with their parents and be saved at the same time reflected the spirit of a “both-and” modus operandi, with which they felt most comfortable. Hence, they did not understand why they had to embrace an “either-or” approach, which suggested that they either had to go to hell and be with their parents or go to heaven without them. I will return to this topic in the fourth chapter.

40 Unfortunately, to the Asian people in general and the Japanese in particular, the act of going to heaven alone without their ancestors might be seen, to a certain extent, as filial impiety. See Ibid.

4.2. **Mateo Ricci: Ignatian spirituality and Chinese culture**

Among the great supporters of cultural adaptation was Mateo Ricci (1552–1610), an Italian Jesuit, who worked in China from 1582 to 1610. Upon his arrival in Macau in 1582, Ricci began to study Chinese language and customs. This was the beginning of a long project that made him one of the first Western scholars to master Chinese script and classical Chinese. A year later, he and his companion, Michele Ruggieri, moved to Zhaoqing and began their first mission in Mainland China. At first, they dressed as and adopted the role of Buddhist monks (Bonzes). They later realized that the Chinese government and its people, at that time, did not honor Buddhism as much as Confucianism. Therefore, they decided to change from the role of the Bonzes to Confucians (literati).42

To get a better understanding of Confucianism, Ricci spent many hours in serious conversation with the local literati. According to Arnold Rowbotham, it was through this humble and open dialogue that Ricci realized that, “in Confucianism, there was nothing fundamentally in opposition to the Christian idea of God and the immortality of the soul.”43 Ricci also recognized traits of God’s actions in this sect, and thus, he began to find ways to harmonize the teachings of Christian dogma with those of the Confucians.

If Ricci’s tolerance towards Confucianism was very high, his receptivity of Taoism and Buddhism was quite low, if not an outright rejection. This phenomenon occurred because Ricci was not willing to spend a substantial amount of time studying Buddhist and Taoist doctrines in order to discern and understand their views as he did with Confucianism.44 Hence, on the one hand, Ricci held the view that it was better to argue against them than to hate them, and to persuade them by intellectual reasoning than to argue against them. He

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even recognized many similarities in dogma and ritual between Christianity and these two religions: a kind of Trinity,\textsuperscript{45} observance of celibacy, almsgiving, detachment, and respect for other species. On the other hand, he insisted that those resemblances were deceptions set by the devil, and as a result, he poured scorn on the Buddhist and Taoist ideas and viewed these two religions as sects of idolaters, which had to be rejected.\textsuperscript{46} In doing so, Ricci closed a window of opportunity for the Chinese converts to practice their discernment and obedience according to the Buddhist and Taoist traditions.

4.3. Roberto De Nobili: Ignatian spirituality and Indian culture

Roberto de Nobili was an Italian Jesuit missionary to southern India. He was born in 1557 to a noble family, a fact which he later used to commend his teaching to the upper caste in India. Throughout his mission in India, de Nobili worked hard to penetrate the Indian élite’s world of scholars so as to understand them. He was, as Aylward Shorter points out, “the first European to acquire first-hand knowledge of Sanskrit and to read the Hindu Scriptures, the Vedas, and the Vedanta in their original languages.”\textsuperscript{47}

Upon his arrival in Goa in May 1605, de Nobili understood that he could only make progress if he dressed in Oriental dress, and adopted Indian ways of thinking and doing. He reflected on, and took notice of, the reason for the failure of missionaries who went to India before him. He recognized that previous missionaries often worked with and served those who were rejected. In doing so, they consciously or unconsciously led people to believe that

\textsuperscript{45} According to Mahayana Buddhism, Buddha has three bodies (\textit{Trikāya} in Sanskrit): (1) \textit{Dharmakāya} (truth body or body of universal principle), which is transcendent beyond comprehension; (2) \textit{Sambhogakāya} (body of enjoyment or bliss), which is the exalted place of assembled buddhas who receive the teaching of the Buddha or the place of deity, and (3) \textit{Nirmānakāya} (body of appearance or created body), which is the body of the historical Buddha walking on earth (i.e., manifesting in time and space). See Richard A. Gard, \textit{Buddhism} (New York: George Braziller Inc., 1962), 62–63, and 83–86.

\textsuperscript{46} Jacques Gernet, \textit{China and the Christian Impact}, 72ff.

\textsuperscript{47} Aylward Shorter, S.J., \textit{Toward A Theology of Inculturation} (Eugene, OR: Orbis Books, 1999), 160.
converting to Christianity would mean becoming the outcast Parangis (the detested foreigners). Because of this, the Gospel message was seen as inferior and belonging to a polluted group. Therefore, de Nobili decided to reverse this approach by behaving as and wearing clothes belonging to the Brahmins—the highest caste, according to the Indian tradition.48

To avoid appearing polluted and thereby defeating the purpose of adopting Brahmin ways of living, Nobili projected an image of himself as a Christian sannyasi, a religious ascetic who renounced the world and detached himself from material life. He decided to live apart from others and have no contact with people of a low-caste background. He did not, however, look down on or allow Brahmin converts to maintain an attitude of looking down on those of a lower caste. On the contrary, he advised them to treat the Parangis with esteem and consideration because they too received the light of the Gospel.

To deepen his understanding of Indian culture, he entered into a twenty-day dialogue with a local scholar. Nobili listened to what his dialogue partner said without looking down on him, and he admitted that “these people [Indian scholars] were not as ignorant as some people imagined.”49 It was through dialogues such as this one that he understood Indian viewpoints and learned from them. His evangelization then became more efficient.

Unlike the missionaries who had arrived in India before him, Nobili decided to let the local people retain their appropriate Tamil names for baptism. He allowed them to keep the Indian sacred thread on their shoulders and wear sandal-paste and the tuft of hair peculiar to the three highest castes; for he understood that they were signs of Indian caste identity. De Nobili believed that his main mission was “to bring Christianity to the Indians, not as a way

48 Vincent Cronin, A Pearl to India (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1959), 45.
49 Ibid., 61ff.
of life imported by the Parangis from Europe, but as the crown of all that was best in India.\textsuperscript{50} Hence, he encouraged them to maintain most of their local traditions, although, whenever possible, he tried to purify harmless customs of any superstitious trace and redirect them towards the true God. In fact, de Nobili always insisted that Christianity, though lived and expressed in various cultures, would transcend them all; and therefore, no one had to deny his or her own identity to join this Church.\textsuperscript{51} This view allowed the local people to be at home with their culture. They then could practice their faith, discern their ways of living, and continue to obey God, not as Westerners, but as true Indians.

De Nobili’s manner of inculturation was not always perfect. Cronin takes notice of crucial errors that Nobili made: he put on the thread, but most \textit{sannyasis} (Hindu ascetics) discarded it as a sign that they had forsaken worldly things. He also modified the thread (e.g., attaching a small cross to it) without knowing that such an act would change its nature and meaning.\textsuperscript{52} Like Mateo Ricci, de Nobili concentrated his attention on one side of the religious scale, focusing solely on Hinduism (as Ricci focused solely on Confucianism) and ignoring or downplaying the role of Buddhism. And because he did not study the doctrines of the latter in depth, de Nobili quickly concluded that “the Buddhist system is very subtle or, rather, bristling with fallacies” and that “Buddhist conceptions of theology jumble together all things divine and human alike.”\textsuperscript{53} He then advised Indian Christians, especially those who were once Buddhists, to keep a distance from that religion. In that sense, he repeated the same mistake that Ricci had made, i.e., discouraging the Indian converts from using values

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 117–118.
\textsuperscript{51} Unlike de Nobili, other missionaries in India at that time often gave the new converts not only the Portuguese form of a Christian name, but also a Portuguese surname. They also demanded that the local people rip the thread off their shoulders if the latter wanted to join the Christian Church. Such an act, Cronin asserts, was equivalent to a ripping off of their caste, and with it, their Indian identity. See ibid., 109–110.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 80.
\textsuperscript{53} Roberto de Nobili, \textit{Preaching Wisdom to the Wise} (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2000), 86.
from their old religion that could be helpful in their way of living the Christian faith, especially in regard to discernment and obedience. A window of opportunity for having a mutual dialogue with Buddhism was, thus, closed.

4.4. **Alexandre de Rhodes: Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture**

Alexander de Rhodes was born in Avignon in 1593. He entered the Society of Jesus in 1612. He was ordained a priest in 1618 and sent to Asia a year later. De Rhodes began his missionary work first in Macau (1623), then in Cochinchina (twice, the first time in 1624 and the second in 1640), and finally in Tonkin (1627).  

Upon his arrival in Cochinchina (1624), de Rhodes set to work immediately with Francisco de Pina and Cristoforo Borri, who had already established their mission in that region. Comparing his own preaching (through interpreters) to Pina’s preaching of the Gospel directly to the local people, de Rhodes concluded that he had to learn Vietnamese if he wanted to produce good fruit. Therefore, he decided to study the language. This task was extremely difficult for him, and he lamented in his *Travels and Mission*: “Upon hearing the Vietnamese women talking to each other, I thought that I heard the birds whistling and was afraid that I would never be able to learn the language. Each word is monosyllabic, and yet with just a little alteration, its meaning is changed. The word “đạ,” for example, when pronounced differently will have twenty-three different meanings.” Nonetheless, given his linguistic skill and determination, within four months he could hear confessions in Vietnamese, and within six months preach in that language.

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Not only did de Rhodes learn to speak, write, and preach in Vietnamese, but he also dressed in áo thùng (Vietnamese traditional shirt) and quàn ta (Vietnamese traditional trousers) and grew his hair long as if he were one of them.\(^{56}\) He did not stop people from calling him “thày” (teacher) because such a title would bring him higher respect. Indeed, in a country that honored a hierarchical system composed of quan–su–phụ (king–teacher–father) the teacher was placed on a level second to the king. Moreover, whenever he met Vietnamese officials at court, he treated them in the most respectful Vietnamese manner, bowing almost to the ground. This act pleased Lords Nguyễn and Trịnh both so much that they viewed him as a person who knew how to behave in a scholarly manner.\(^{57}\)

De Rhodes adapted to the local culture by saying mass in Vietnamese (except for the Eucharistic prayer, which he recited in Latin) and using the Han and the Vietnamese scripts to express Christian terms without altering their theological meanings.\(^{58}\) He created a Vietnamese version of the catechism and used many Vietnamese folk songs or proverbs to

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\(^{56}\) Áo thùng (shirt) and quàn ta (trousers) were the typical clothes of the Vietnamese people (especially men) at that time. These clothes were made of light material and used in places such as public festivals, in a classroom (for the teacher), or in a temple. The length of the shirt was extended almost to the knee, and its sleeves were quite long and wide. The trouser was not too big but always loose and commodious. See Dương H. Nguyễn, Cộng Giáo Trong Văn Hóa Việt Nam (Hà Nội: NXB Văn Hóa Thông Tin, 2013), 83.

In the eyes of many Western missionaries in Asia at that time, growing long hair was an act that was not compatible with being a Christian. They thus demanded that new converts cut their hair to affirm their willingness to break completely from their barbarian past. Unlike those missionaries, de Rhodes saw this practice as a part of the Asian culture, which caused no harm to Christian values. He insisted: “For my part, I well know that in China I vigorously opposed those who wanted to compel new Christians to cut their long hair, which the men all wear as long as the women’s, and without which they would not be able to move around the country freely nor be part of the society. I used to tell them that the Gospel obliged them to lop off their spiritual errors but not their long hair.” See Peter Phan, “An Asian Christian? Or a Christian Asian? Or an Asian–Christian? A Roman Catholic Experiment on Christian Identity,” Studies in World Christianity and Interreligious Relations, vol. 47 (2011), 61.

\(^{57}\) De Rhodes and many other Jesuit missionaries viewed this act as nothing but cultural adaptation. Other missionaries such as the MEPs (Société des Missions étrangères de Paris), in contrast, would see this as an act of worshiping a human person and hence an idolatrous act. See R. Po-Chia Hsia, Noble Patronage and Jesuit Missions: Maria Theresia von Fugger-Wellenburg (1690–1762) and Jesuit Missionaries in China and Vietnam (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 2006), 77.

\(^{58}\) Examples include terms such as Đức Chúa Trời Đất (the Lord of heaven and earth), Thiên Chúa Nhất Thế Tam Vị (One God with three Persons), or Ba Đặng Bệ Trọn (the three superior beings that are Thương phụ [God], Trung phụ [the earthly king and his officials] and Hạ phụ [parents]). Again the last term (Ba Đặng Bệ Trọn) shows us how skillfully de Rhodes used the concept of Quản-Suí-Phụ and related it to the relationship between God and human beings.
make this catechism fit into the local culture.\textsuperscript{59} He adopted an attitude of not despising the local religions or their traditions but trying to find some goodness in them (a typical Ignatian way of proceeding in these matters). He also founded the Institute of Catechists (Hội Kế Giảng in Vietnamese) for native people as a starting point for establishing the Church in Vietnam, which he promoted in Paris and Rome after his expulsion from Vietnam in 1645.\textsuperscript{60}

De Rhodes’ effort to be inculturated into Vietnamese culture, however, was not flawless. In one of his books, Peter Phan points out:

Unlike Mateo Ricci, Alexandre de Rhodes did not know enough Chinese to read and study Chinese classics firsthand; whatever information he had on Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism as systems of beliefs were secondhand 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.\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{59} At that time, most Jesuits in Asia used Bellarmino’s Catechismus Catholicus to teach the catechumens. Unlike those missionaries, de Rhodes invented his own Catechismus in which he used many Vietnamese proverbs such as “vợ chồng gửi xương gửi thịt cho nhau” (“the husband and the wife give one another their bones and their flesh”) or “sinh kỳ từ quỷ” (“birth is only temporary while death is a real returning [to God]”) to describe the Christian concept of monogamy or life after death. His use of proverbs and folk songs made his teachings easier to understand. Because of this, many Vietnamese people came to de Rhodes’ house, listened attentively to him, and eventually converted to Christianity.

\textsuperscript{60} According to many missionaries at that time, local people were not literate enough. They had no discerning ability, and thus were unworthy to be ordained. De Rhodes held the opposite opinion. Not only did he think that they were worthy of being priests, but he also petitioned for a Church of Vietnam that would have one patriarch, two or three archbishops, and twelve bishops. In a meeting on March 5, 1652, Innocent X (1644–1655) and the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (now known as the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples) rejected his suggestion. Although Rome did not accept Rhodes’ grand petition, she allowed the Church of Vietnam to have two vicar apostolates in 1658, one for Cochin China (led by Bishop Lambert de La Motte) and another for Tonkin (led by Bishop François Pallu). See Chính Q. Đò, S.J., Dòng Tên Trong Xứ Hội Đại Việt 1615–1773 (Society of Jesus in the Vietnamese Society 1615–1773), (Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà Sách Đức Bà Hòa Bình, 2008), 105ff.

Because many missionaries at that time held the view that indigenous men had no discerning ability and hence should not be ordained, it is legitimate to ask whether this view was accurate. The answer depends on how one understands the concept of discernment. If one views discernment through a Western lens (e.g., a lens that focuses on personal desire and the need of placing God and His will at the center of the process), then it appears that these Vietnamese men had some difficulty in discerning according to the Western method (e.g., the Ignatian modus operandi). The reason is that these men had a high regard for authority. They often let obedience to the leader influence or even dictate the process of their own discernment. On the contrary, if one views discernment through an Eastern lens (e.g., emphasizing communal needs and harmony), then those men could discern as well as any Westerner. Chapter 4 of this dissertation will elaborate on this point.

\textsuperscript{61} Peter Phan, In Our Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 165–166.
Undeniably, not having a sophisticated knowledge of Chinese led de Rhodes to misinterpret the doctrines of these three religions and thereby view them as superstitions. Consequently, positive values belonging to these religions might be viewed as unimportant or even harmful to the Christian faith. Hence, similarly to the Chinese and Indian converts, Vietnamese Christians could not transfer what could have been helpful to them from their previous religions into their new religious practice.

Nevertheless, understanding can come not only from an analysis of classical texts, but also from observation of the way the people practice and believe. A focus solely on one dimension can lead one to an imbalanced position, and consequently to misunderstanding and unnecessary tensions. Ricci, for example, defended the legitimacy of ancestor worship on the grounds that it was political and civil in nature, and not religious, by appealing to classical texts, and noting that it was the practice of the élite. De Rhodes, on the contrary, based his disapproval of such a practice solely on the grounds that, through his own observations, he had recognized superstitions in the practices and beliefs of people at the grassroots level.62

The difference between Ricci’s and de Rhodes’ conclusions does not imply that one person was right, and another was wrong. Rather, it reminds readers of the existence of ambiguities in all traditions. It would have been better for Ricci and de Rhodes not to rely so much on one source. Because Ricci focused solely on classical texts while de Rhodes depended excessively on his own observation of the practices and beliefs of the people, they

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62 Although some Vietnamese from the lower classes truly believed in the religiosity of this cult, it was not the case for others. Some people kept the tradition only because of their love and gratitude to the ancestors. Others practiced this cult because they wanted to save face, for the entire community would view them as lacking filial piety if they did not show signs of respect and gratefulness to their ancestors. This lack of piety could become a stigma and could truly destroy their reputation. Still others kept the tradition because it was the law of the land. According to the Hồng Đức Laws (invented by King Lê Thánh Tông in the 1470s), those who committed filial impiety would be severely punished. Punishments included revocation of inheritance rights, ejection from the community, a lengthy jail term, or even death.
both fell into the trap of being biased, which in turn limited their chances of having a mutually enriched dialogue with Asian cultures.

De Rhodes, for example, expressed in one of his books a disapproval of the Vietnamese funeral ritual. He gave readers an accurate narrative of what happened at a Vietnamese burial; but with much bias, he interpreted its vigil and Buddhist prayers as nonsensical and therefore superstitious, when in fact they were in Sanskrit, which was understood only by Buddhist monks. Likewise, he did not have anything positive to say about the anniversary of the dead, and he advised people to replace it with almsgiving. He also had strong reservations about Buddhism and Taoism. To him, these religions were gloomy and senseless. And because of his inability to read Chinese classics as well as Ricci could, de Rhodes placed Confucianism in the same category of the so-called “đạo u minh” (dark-religions). He thus prohibited new Christians from calling Confucius a sage so that they would not fall into sacrilege.

Due to a high respect for an authority figure such as de Rhodes, many Vietnamese did not dare to say anything that was contrary to his view. They either kept a clear distance from their religious past, so as to be good Christians as required by de Rhodes, or they

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63 Alexandre de Rhodes, S.J., Lịch Sử Vương Quốc Đàng Ngoài (The History of the Kingdom of Tonkin), 45.
During the anniversary of the death of an ancestor, the Vietnamese people often place incense sticks, candles, flowers, fruits or foods on the ancestral table. The oldest son offers sincere prayers to invite the ancestors to return and witness the love of those who stay behind. He uses an oration such as this: “I beg you, father, to return to us, for we all remember the tremendous love and sacrifice that you gave us when you were alive. The only hope that we hold at this moment is to believe that you are present still among us and accept and taste the offerings we place on your altar today as a way to express our gratitude and desire for consolation during the time we mourn your absence in this world…” Some Vietnamese truly believe that their loved ones will return from the other world to taste the foods and hear the oration. This belief is not necessarily common, however, and the majority do this only to express their gratefulness towards the deceased. De Rhodes did not give much consideration to this difference. He took their oration literally and concluded that the practice was either superstitious or too ambiguous, and that therefore Vietnamese Christians should avoid it. See ibid., 53ff.

64 Ibid., 39.

65 The Vietnamese have a high respect for religious figures (e.g., Buddhist monks or Christian priests). To them, these figures have a close relationship with God, and thus they possess higher authority than others.
walked away from him. This *either-or* approach was very different from their usual *both-and* perspective. It led them to confusion and prevented them from making an effective discernment (a point which the fourth chapter of this thesis will elaborate).

The three examples above indicate that Jesuit missions in Asia during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries shared many things in common. An exploration of these commonalities may help in understanding the reasons for the missionaries’ successes and failures in that continent. It will also help to identify a few remaining issues. Identification of these commonalities and issues provide a springboard for understanding and dialoging with cultures other than one’s own.

5. **Commonalities of Jesuit missions in Asia and a few remaining issues**

Influenced by their spirituality, most Jesuit missionaries came to Asia and attempted to adapt to a new way of living. They spoke and wrote the local languages. They imitated the indigenous ways of dressing and living. They deepened their understanding of Asian philosophy and culture through candid conversation and studies with local scholars. This was particularly true during the seventeenth century, a period when an accommodative approach was predominant. An image of a Jesuit dressing like a Mandarin (Ricci), putting on a white dhoti and wearing wooden sandals to imitate the look of a Sannyasin (de Nobili), or wearing *áo thung* (shirt) and *quân ta* (trousers) like other local men (de Rhodes), was not rare for Jesuit missionaries in Asia during that time.

Moreover, because of a desire to *find God in all things*, Jesuit missionaries often showed a certain level of tolerance and respect toward those who believed in different deities. They tried to develop a good rapport with local cultures and engage in dialogues that helped to increase their knowledge of others and thereby reduce unnecessary tension. Yet, as
the Knights of Christ whose mission was to help souls, they did not come to Asia solely to make friends, but to convert people to Christianity. The methods they used might have been different, but their end goal was not. They all focused on bringing the infidels to Christ under the unified Church. Hence, they shared many positive and negative things in common.

5.1. Commonalities of Jesuit Missions in Asia

Jesuit missionaries in Asia were faithful and courageous. They were ready to do all for Christ, even if it meant martyrdom. They put all their effort into the mission and were willing to adopt any method that led them to success. The cultural accommodation was a significant method in their approach. Unfortunately, as Chính Đỗ, a renowned Vietnamese Jesuit historian, points out, although it was not common to all missions, some Jesuits used manipulative tactics to persuade others. Their actions raised eyebrows among the local people, who wondered whether these men came to their country to build or destroy its social and cultural harmony.

Jesuit missionaries were passionate about their missionary tasks and eagerly wanted to bring about a unified Church under the banner of Christ. Because of this overzealousness, they had a tendency to dismiss the values of the local cultures, and to discourage new converts from incorporating these values into their ways of discerning God’s will, obeying God’s commands, and living their faith. Though many missionaries showed genuine respect for local religions, they still unconsciously or consciously put what they personally believed at the center of their teaching, and fit everything around it. The selective quotations chosen to demonstrate the compatibility between Confucianism and Christianity or the translations of the Confucian canons, for example, were mainly for the propagation of Christianity. Hence,

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they inevitably involved distortion. In fact, many Jesuits intentionally reinterpreted the doctrines of Confucianism to make them fit those of Christianity.\textsuperscript{67}

A deeper commonality is that these Jesuit missionaries tended to embrace an \textit{either-or} rather than a \textit{both-and} approach. Unlike Easterners, who focused on the harmony between things, these missionaries insisted on the principle of contradiction that stated: “If one thing is A, it cannot also be B. If a symbol is true, it must be an adequate representation, and in that case, other symbols of the same reality must either say the same thing or must be untrue.”\textsuperscript{68}

Because of this, they (the Jesuit missionaries) held the view that Christianity was enough. There was no need to embrace or practice any other religion.\textsuperscript{69}

Moreover, because they believed that Christianity was the one true religion, and that all other gods were nothing but idols, these missionaries considered the symbols of other

\textsuperscript{67} For example, the “Biography of Confucius” in the \textit{Morals of Confucius} describes Confucius as a Christian prophet like Moses. Likewise, the Jesuit translators interpret the phrase “there is a sage among people in the West,” cited from the “Zhongni” section in \textit{Liezi}, as a prophecy made by Confucius about the birth of Jesus Christ in Palestine. The translators even gloss “the proper man” in a phrase from the \textit{Doctrine of the Mean} as Jesus Christ. They also interpret “spiritual beings” as the messengers sent by God. See Lee Seung-hwan, \textit{A Topography of Confucian Discourse: Politico-philosophical Reflections on Confucian Discourse since Modernity} (New Jersey: Homa and Sekey Books, 2004), 22ff.

Ricci was no exception. According to one tradition, Emperor Ming (58–75 A.D.) of the Han dynasty had a dream in which he saw a large golden figure. Having been assured by a minister that the figure was that of the Buddha, he sent ambassadors in search of him. His ambassadors went to India and brought back with them the Buddhist doctrines. Without having any evidence to support his claim, Ricci reinterpreted the story and asserted that this Emperor’s true intention was to search for Christ rather than Buddha. Nonetheless, those subjects stopped only in India, bringing back the teaching of Buddha and deceiving the Emperor, who in turn believed that Buddhism was truly the teaching he was looking for. Based on this speculative theory, Ricci concluded that Buddhism in China was built on a foundation of deceit, and hence that it was not worthy of respect. See Paul Rule, \textit{K’ung-tzu or Confucius}, 41ff. De Rhodes later used the same theory to dismiss the authenticity of Buddhism in Vietnam. See Alexandre de Rhodes, S.J., \textit{Lịch Sử Vương Quốc Đàng Ngoài (The History of the Kingdom of Tonkin)}, translated by Xuyên K. Nguyễn, 42–43.


\textsuperscript{69} As Ricci himself argues in one of his books: “The Three Religions [Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism] are either all true and complete or they are all false and incomplete; or one of them is true and complete, and the other two are false and incomplete. If each of the Three Religions is true and complete, then it is enough to believe one of them. Why should one have to practice the other two? If they are false and incomplete, then they ought all to be rejected. Of what use is it to embrace all three of them? To cause a man to practice one false religion is a sufficiently grave error; how much greater, then, will the error be if he is made to practice three false religions? If one is a true and complete religion, and the two others are false and incomplete, then one ought to follow the one true religion. Of what use are the false ones?” See Mateo Ricci, S.J., \textit{The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven} (St. Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1985), 403–405.
religions as evil and superstitious. Thus, they asked new Christians to forego all customs related to previous religious traditions, some of which were solely cultural and brought no harm to the new faith. Such a complete disconnection from the past often made new converts feel at odds with their own culture.\textsuperscript{70}

A further commonality among Jesuit missions in Asia is that, although they tried to apply the best interpretation to each circumstance, many Jesuit missionaries fell into the trap of placing themselves at an “elite and intellectual level.” Because of such a mentality, they did not “try hard enough to understand the authentic religious experience of the popular religion in their own tradition and a priori in other religious traditions.”\textsuperscript{71} They then had a tendency to dismiss other religious traditions as valueless.

Finally, there was never a consensus on the policy of accommodation among the Jesuits. Each Jesuit often did what he saw fit and disagreed with any method that was not familiar to him. In some circumstances, two Jesuits worked together in the same mission while pursuing different and even contradictory approaches.\textsuperscript{72} Of course, a particular method might work well in one situation but lead to disaster in another; and hence, a one-size-fits-all formula was not a good idea. On the other hand, the method of working in isolation, having no consensus or promoting too many methods, might cause their mission more harm than

\textsuperscript{70} Michael Amaladoss, S.J., \textit{Beyond Inculturation – Can the Many Be One?} (Vidyaiyoti Education & Welfare Society: ISPCK, 2005), 119.

\textsuperscript{71} Michael Amaladoss, S.J., \textit{Mission Today} (Rome: Centrum Ignatianum Spiritualitatis, 1988), 106. One example is the way Mateo Ricci, de Nobili, and de Rhodes quickly dismissed Buddhist and Taoist doctrines based on their lack of a deep understanding of the latter.

\textsuperscript{72} For example, although both Roberto de Nobili and Gonzalo Fernandez were working at the same mission, they used opposite approaches. De Nobili embraced a total adaptation while the latter preferred to maintain as many Western characteristics as possible. To Fernandez, the Western features appeared to be more civilized than those of the locale, and thus the Indian converts would be much better off by acquiring them. Seeing de Nobili embracing a method that was different from his own, Fernandez thought that de Nobili was walking on the wrong path. Therefore, he sent numerous complaints to superiors and the general in Rome. His complaints led to serious investigations plagued by misconceptions, misunderstandings, and misinformation. See Vincent Cronin, \textit{A Pearl to India}, 149ff.
good. Local people might see this not as diversity but chaos, for they did not see the harmony that existed between those missionaries.

5.2. Remaining Issues

Studying these commonalities, one can recognize a few issues still remaining. The first of these issues is the overzealousness in some missionaries that prevented them from engaging in a mutually enriched dialogue with other cultures. Such an attitude often led them to a position of not paying enough attention to the feelings of their conversation partners, or to what they said, did, or believed.

There also was an imbalance between the Jesuits’ desire to carry out their missionary tasks and the approaches they used to fulfill them. The methods these missionaries chose and their inability to perceive things through a different mode from their own made others suspect that these Jesuit missionaries wanted to win a battle, rather than enter into a genuine dialogue with them.

Third, adaptability and flexibility are crucial features of Ignatian spirituality. Nonetheless, Jesuit missionaries in Asia often worked as individuals and seemed not to worry much about having a consensus on the policy of accommodation within the order. They did not realize that such an inclination would put an end to their effort to maintain the long-lasting impact of Ignatian spirituality on other cultures.73

Finally, despite how hard they tried, Jesuit missionaries in Asia could not close the gap that existed between their ways of thinking and living and those of Easterners. The

73 In reality, not having a consensus on the policy of accommodation among themselves often led Jesuit missionaries to use their own preferred methods. The effects of each method on a particular mission, however, would end when the missionaries were sent to another region or when they died. To make matters worse, when other missionaries came to replace them, the newcomers would use their own approaches, and as a result, they waited a long time before the new method began to yield fruit. When this phenomenon kept happening, the ability of Ignatian spirituality to maintain a long-lasting impact on other cultures was limited.
either-or mentality made them feel uneasy with this gap. They seemed to forget that distinctions between the two worlds were inevitable. Hence, instead of trying to remove them, they should have entered into a mutually enriched dialogue with Asian cultures and learned from each other so as to know how to live with differences. Unfortunately, many missionaries in Asia decided to use another approach: they imposed their view on the other, in the hope that they could effect the kind of result they wanted. This action only caused more misunderstanding and unnecessary tension.

Although it is impossible to go back and erase the past, a presentation of Vietnamese culture can help one to identify what those Jesuit missionaries missed. Through this presentation, readers can understand why the Vietnamese people think and live the way they do. They will have a better understanding of the roots of the difficulties that existed in the engagement between Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture at that time (and even today) concerning the issue of discernment and obedience. Such an understanding will help both sides to search for better ways to engage each another.
Chapter Two

Vietnamese Culture: The Ways of Thinking and Living

This chapter is a short presentation of Vietnamese history and culture. It aims to help non-Vietnamese readers acquire a better understanding of Vietnam, as well as how Vietnamese people think, act, and believe.\(^1\) Using Kỳ Trương’s theory, the chapter will study the origin of the dissimilarities between Eastern and Western ways of thinking and acting and will analyze how these dissimilarities may hinder engagement between these two worlds.\(^2\) Based on these criteria, the chapter will describe how the differences between East and West were responsible for many of the successes and failures of Jesuit missionaries who tried to inculturate themselves into Vietnamese culture. Finally, the chapter will identify some issues that need to be reexamined.

1. Overview of Vietnamese history and culture

Trần Ngọc Thêm, a professor of Culture, Linguistics, and Oriental Studies at the Ho Chi Minh National University, defines culture as “an organic system that includes all material and spiritual values formed and accumulated by human beings in their daily activities and interactions with each other and with the natural and social environments around them.”\(^3\) Thêm asserts that cultural values always have an influence on the way people

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\(^1\) In the previous chapter I presented a historical account of the Jesuits, their spirituality and mission, and their encounters with other cultures. Such an account helps the Vietnamese people understand their Western dialogue partners and thereby enter into conversation with them. Nonetheless, this conversation may not be fully enriched if there is a lack of mutual understanding between both parties who are involved. To avoid this lack of mutual understanding, a short account of Vietnamese history and culture is therefore necessary.

\(^2\) Kỳ Trương is a Vietnamese philosopher who uses the concepts of Tính vs. Động (static vs. dynamic or passive vs. active) to discuss the origin of the Eastern and Western philosophies. Through this concept, he proposes a theory explaining why Easterners and Westerners think, act, and live differently. See his Christianity and the People of Vietnam (Carthage: Tủ Sách Đàm Đạo Tôn Giáo, 2005), 43ff.

\(^3\) “Văn hóa là hệ thống hầu có các giá trị vật chất và tinh thần do con người sáng tạo và tích lũy qua quá trình hoạt động thực dân, trong sự tương tác giữa con người với môi trường tự nhiên và xã hội của...
perceive and respond to the world. In Vietnam, these influences can go as far as requiring people to play an active role in being passive, insofar as they enter into a mutual relationship with surrounding factors and learn from them. As a result, the Vietnamese often view themselves as the people who exist and are complete only when they enter into a communal relationship with others.⁴

To understand why Thêm and his fellow Vietnamese hold a worldview that emphasizes a communal element as a top priority, one needs an appreciation of the history of Vietnam. Although it is impossible to detail the history of a nation that dates back to the third millennium BC, this section can, at least, identify a few crucial historical factors and summarize the four main periods of the nation. The periods are (1) the independence before the invasion of China, (2) the thousand years of struggle for liberation from China, (3) the hundred years of the French protectorate, and (4) twenty years of civil war followed by the communist regime.⁵

**1.1. Vietnam before the invasion of China**

As early as 2879 BC, a group of Mongolians traveled south along the Red River and settled around its delta. This group eventually formed a separate nation called Lạc Việt under the leadership of the Hùng Dynasty. To maintain its uniqueness, this group of people relied on a myth claiming that their first father was Lạc Long Quân, a sacred dragon from the sea, and their first mother was Âu Cơ, a goddess from the mountaintop.⁶

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⁴ Ibid., 27ff.
⁵ Since this thesis focuses on inculturation within the conversation between Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture, with particular reference to the theme of discernment and obedience, this section will concentrate on elements related to authority, obedience, and discernment.
⁶ The purpose of this myth is fivefold. First, it invites people to reflect on the need to strengthen unification and solidarity among those who originate from a mix of different groups. Second, it asserts a belief
According to common belief, the first king of the Hùng dynasty was the oldest son of Long Quân and Âu Cơ. As the oldest son, he was given the authority to lead his brothers and sisters, and the younger siblings were asked to listen to him. Thus, there had to be a mutual, relational, communal, and loving dimension in the practice of authority, discernment, and obedience. This dimension reflected itself in the way these kings exercised their kingship. Throughout its 18 generations of kings, the Hùng dynasty had to unite the nation and protect it from being destroyed by surrounding countries (e.g., China). These rulers understood that the best way to achieve this difficult mission was not through power or the subjugation of their subjects’ will but an emphasis on familial relationships. Hence, they always stood in unity with the entire Lạc Việt group. In doing so, they could stabilize and harmonize the nation and deepen their understanding of the way things related to each other. Philosophy on the relationship between Heaven, Earth, and Humanity was, thus, essential.  

To these ancient Vietnamese, it seemed that the universe was controlled by a harmonious correlation among Heaven (Thiên), Earth (Địa), and Humanity (Nhân). In this relationship, the Heaven creates (Thiên sinh) and, hence is in control (perfect authority). The Earth is given the duty to nurture what is created (Địa dưỡng). Human beings are offered the responsibility to harmonize what is created and nurtured (Nhân hòa). Through the very act of discerning and obeying Heaven’s will, Earth and Humanity live to the fullest. These three

that despite their difference in origin, all Vietnamese are brothers and sisters. Third, the myth indicates that the task of unifying all into one family is possible only when everyone pays attention to the good of the whole community rather than that of the individual. Fourth, it points out one important conviction: only because of this harmonious end goal can this culture become as unique as it is. Finally, this myth demonstrates that the Vietnamese have the ability “to appropriate the Chinese civilization [the Âu Cơ component] and, at the same time, do not need the civilizing mission of the conquering Chinese.” In fact, with the help of the Long Quân element, the Vietnamese people restrained themselves from an overzealous attitude toward Chinese civilization and kept their culture from being totally assimilated by that of the latter. See Phan, Vietnamese-American Catholics, (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 8–9.

7 This philosophy is also known as the Triple Philosophy or Triết Tam Tài in Vietnamese.

8 Peter Phan, Christianity with an Asian Face (New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 243.
entities are closely related to the point that none can exist without the other two: “Heaven without Earth and Humanity cannot produce or express anything. Earth without Heaven and Humanity would be an empty desert. Humanity without Heaven would be directionless, and without Earth would have nowhere to exist and act.”

More often than not, the practice of Vietnamese discernment and obedience is oriented toward the goal of maintaining and enhancing this close relationship between Heaven, Earth, and Humanity.

1.2. Vietnam: A thousand years of struggle for liberation

Following the 18 generations of the Hùng kings, the other two dynasties (the Thúc and Triệu, both from China) took over the leadership of Lạc Việt and led the nation in a new direction. Although the Thúc and Triệu tried to adopt some Vietnamese customs to convince the local people that they were not invaders, their views of authority and obedience were not the same. Instead of seeing authority through a relational, communal, and familial lens, they equated it with power. Those who were powerless had to submit their will to the will of the leader through an act of obedience. The goal of discernment was reduced to a search for total submission. This point of view was enforced even further throughout the period of 1050 years under the domination of various Chinese dynasties.

Living under such domination, the Vietnamese tried to maintain their distinctiveness. The parameter of that uniqueness, however, changed over the years. The reasons behind this

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9 Peter Phan, Vietnamese-American Catholics, 27.
10 A Chinese man named Thúc Phan dethroned the last Hùng king in 222 BC and founded the kingdom of Âu Lạc. Fifteen years later, another Chinese man named Châu Tố defeated Âu Lạc and ruled over the kingdom, changing its name to Nam Việt. See Kim T. Trần, Việt Nam Sử Luộc (A Brief Overview of the History of Vietnam) (Hà Nội: Bộ Giáo Dục, 1920), 10–11.
11 Interrupted by periodic insurrections, these 1050 years can be divided into four periods: (1) from 114 BC to 40 AD under the Western Han dynasty; (2) from 43 to 544 under the Eastern Han, the Eastern Xin, and the Qin dynasties; (3) from 602 to 938 under the Sui and the Tang dynasties; and (4) from 1407–1428 under the Ming dynasty. After 938, Vietnam enjoyed an extended period of independence and successfully resisted many attempts to regain domination by foreign entities. In 1407, the Ming dynasty once more placed Vietnam under its control, marking the last period of China’s domination over Vietnam. See ibid., 17–25 and 83.
alteration were that the concept of Thiên–Địa–Nhân (Heaven–Earth–Humanity) did not prohibit change. On the contrary, it encouraged people to expand their horizons and accept new values so long as these new values did not threaten the old ones.\(^{12}\) Thus, there was a chance for many Chinese customs to enter into Vietnamese culture. Moreover, Vietnamese and Chinese worldviews had similarities. The harmonious concept of Thiên–Địa–Nhân, for example, coincided well with the concept of Yin and Yang in Taoism. The idea of self-cultivation (intellectual and moral striving) in Confucianism, or enlightenment (the awakening of the mind to the meaning of the truth) in Buddhism, was not incompatible with the invitation to be real humans, i.e., to try one’s best to live according to the truth rooted in Heaven and nurtured by Earth. These similarities made the Vietnamese feel at home, and hence they did not see the need to reject the new concepts that came from China. Lastly, Chinese civilization was attractive. Thus, although the Vietnamese were finally successful in escaping a thousand years of Chinese domination and thereby protecting their Vietnamese identity, the intellectual elites usually looked up to China as a cultural model. Many Vietnamese historical books, literary works, legal institutions, and religious ideas were modeled after Chinese counterparts.\(^{13}\)

Because of these factors, the practice of authority and obedience in Vietnam changed tremendously. Authority now came from the top down rather than from within or from below, as suggested in Thiên–Địa–Nhân. The dialogue between a leader and his followers was limited, and hence obedience was nothing but an act of blindly following the order given

\(^{12}\) The concept of harmony in Vietnamese culture aims at reconciling differences into a harmonious unity in a way that is very different from uniformity or identity. To the Vietnamese, although harmony is not compatible with difference, it results when differences are brought together to form a unity. This harmony is the foundation upon which the Vietnamese view of discernment relies, and it is the reason for their obedience. I will discuss this point in the subsequent chapters.

by the leader. Though harmony was still a focal point, the concept of hierarchy in relationships overshadowed everything. For example, Confucianism emphasized the three basic relationships between king and subjects, husband and wife, and parent and child. In each set, the prior had (almost) absolute authority over the latter, and as a result, the dignity of a person, especially a woman, was truly at stake. Likewise, Taoism saw things through the two poles Yin and Yang, which focused on the harmony of all things. An over-emphasis on harmony, however, could lead people to the point of avoiding conflict at all costs, especially with their superiors. Peter Phan describes this phenomenon in one of his books: “If asked to do something they [the Vietnamese people] found burdensome, they will not say ‘no’ for fear of disrespect. They will say ‘yes,’ but ‘yes’ does not always mean agreement, only that the request has been acknowledged.”

The dynamic of authority and obedience, thus, became somewhat ambivalent.

1.3. Vietnam: A hundred years under the protectorate of France

In 939, Vietnam gained its freedom from Chinese domination. A series of 11 dynasties succeeded one another to rule the country. At the end of the tenth dynasty, a man named Nguyễn Ánh tried to dethrone the Tây Sơn. To fulfill his desire, he sought help from a French bishop, Pierre Pigneau de Béhaine. With such assistance, Ánh successfully defeated the Tây Sơn and founded the last Vietnamese dynasty, also known as the Nguyễn in 1802. His victory, however, opened the door for the French to enter into Vietnam.

14 Peter Phan points out a poignant reality: “A woman in a Confucian society is taught to be bound by three submissions (tam tòng): when a child, she must submit to her father (tòng phụ); in marriage, to her husband (tòng phụ); in widowhood, to her eldest son (tòng tử). Her behavior is to be guided by four virtues (tü dực) that are designed to restrict women’s role to the sphere of domesticity: assiduous housewifery (công), pleasing appearance (dung), appropriate speech (ngôn), and proper conduct (ánh).” See Phan, Christianity with an Asian Face, 23.

15 Peter Phan, Vietnamese-American Catholics, 79–80.
The relationship between France and Vietnam was smooth in the beginning. But it worsened over the years, especially under the rule of Ánh’s successors (e.g., Minh Mạng, Thiệu Trị, and Tự Đức). For many reasons, these rulers aggressively opposed the French and missionaries. They put many missionaries in jail and even executed them. The French government capitalized on this opportunity to gain a foothold in the commercial trade with Asia. In 1858, the French initiated a war with Vietnam by an attack on Đà Nẵng. Four years later, they forced Tự Đức to sign a treaty making the southern part of Vietnam a French colony. Not long after that, the entire country was made a French protectorate until 1954.

Since the French did not see the Vietnamese ways of interpreting the practice of discernment and obedience as being compatible with theirs, they promoted new ideas. They introduced individual rights and emphasized orderly conduct. They discouraged familial relationships and loyalty in the society and replaced them with internal conscience and external laws. It was hard for the Vietnamese to accept these concepts; yet given their view of harmony and adaptability, some aspects of the new views found their way into the main system. The Vietnamese understanding of authority and obedience had once more shifted. For instance, the relationship between a leader and subjects began to orient towards a system that relied more on a rule-base (lý) than a relationship-base (tình). One obeyed one’s leader, not because of one’s respect for the other, but because of a legal requirement to comply.

1.4. Vietnam: twenty years of civil war, control of the communist party, and thereafter

In 1954, the Geneva Conference split Vietnam into two parts: the North (above the 17th Parallel), which belonged to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam or Communist

16 The French attempt to impose Christian values (e.g., sending away concubines, giving up the cult of ancestors) appeared to threaten the fabric of Vietnamese society and became one reason underlying the Nguyễn dynasty’s aggressiveness toward the French and missionaries.
Vietnam, and the South (below that latitude), which came under the control of the Republic of Vietnam. Assisted by Communist China and the Soviet Union and inspired by Marxist ideology, Hồ Chí Minh from the North attempted to unify the whole country under communist rule. With the assistance of the United States and the capitalist world, Ngô Đình Diệm from the South tried to stop the spread of the red wave. These two ideologies led Vietnam to a bloody civil war that lasted for more than 20 years.

To advance its agenda, each side imposed its interpretation and ideology on many matters, ranging from human rights to authority or personal duty to the benefit of the entire nation. The government of South Vietnam, for instance, upheld the values adopted from Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and the Triple Philosophy (Thiên–Địa–Nhân). Its goal was to reunite the country under the concept that all Vietnamese are brothers and sisters in the same family of Long Quán and Âu Cơ. The northern communists followed an idea adopted from Mao Tsetung. According to Mao, the Confucian concepts and the capitalist and revisionist ideas only serve the exploiting classes. Thus, they had to be uprooted and replaced by Marxist ideology—an ideology that defined authority as the power belonging to the working class and obedience as a necessary act to ensure the success of the class revolution.\(^\text{17}\)

At the end of April 1975, Sài Gòn fell into the hands of the communists, thus marking the end of the Vietnam War and leading the whole country into a new phase. The communist regime had a chance to enforce its ideology on the entire nation. Those who could not accept such an iron and inhumane rule had to escape Vietnam and live an exiled life in another country. The majority of those escapees reside in the United States.

This brief description of Vietnam’s history helps one to expand one’s understanding of a nation that, on the one hand, has struggled to maintain its core identity, and that on the

other hand has still allowed itself to be influenced by traditions coming from the outside. How do these historical and cultural elements influence the way these people think, act and believe?

2. **Historical and cultural influences on the way Vietnamese people think, act, and believe**

There are many historical and cultural elements that influence the way Vietnamese people think, act and believe. Because of the limitations of space, this section will only discuss four main features: first, a tendency to embrace a harmonious, flexible, and collective approach; second, a strong belief in multi-religions; third, a love for adaptability and creativity; and fourth, a high respect for ancestors and authority.

2.1. **Harmony, flexibility, and collectivism in Vietnamese culture**

In the history of Vietnam, one can recognize the story of a nation struggling to maintain its identity and unification. It is also the story of a nation trying to protect itself from being attacked and assimilated by other countries, such as China. Thus, despite the influence of ideas from outsiders, the Vietnamese have always tried to search for a middle ground in order to survive and enrich themselves with new concepts without losing their core values. It is reasonable for them, then, to focus intently on the communal aspect and to place harmony at the heart of everything, even in the practice of discernment and obedience. The need to protect themselves from surrounding nations, however, is not the only factor that led the Vietnamese to embrace a communal and flexible approach. Their lifestyle also played a decisive role.

From the beginning, the Vietnamese who settled around the Red River delta started to develop one of the earliest agricultural systems. As farmers whose lives centered around the
fields and whose progress depended on the harvest, they took note of what happened around them. They noted that what they planted in the field could only yield good fruit when there was harmony between day and night, dry and rain, hot and cold. They understood that, if they wanted a good harvest, they had to work with each other. These ancient Vietnamese also recognized a close relationship between mobility and stability, even within one element.

For example, if they heated water to a certain degree, it would change to steam and hence became more mobile; but if they cooled it down beyond a certain level, it would harden and thus became less flexible. They realized that there were many intermediate degrees between things. Shirt A might look white compared with shirt B, yet darker compared with shirt C. Something absolute in one circumstance could become relative in another. With a similar thought, the early Vietnamese pointed out the fact that, even if there was no compatibility between good and evil, the most righteous person had always lived with some shortcomings, and the evildoer still possessed potential goodness. Those who lived rationally might fall into the trap of rigidity, and those who lived realistically might enjoy flexibility.

Based on these observations, they concluded that embracing extreme positions would not help anyone because things were always changing and relating. Hence, they promoted a balanced position in which each person tried to offend no one, to be as flexible and adaptable

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Major tasks such as making irrigational canals or building dikes against flooding required more than a family. Hence, unlike the Chinese, whose communal emphasis was often limited to one family or one clan, the Vietnamese extended that aspect to the entire village or province. The concept of collectivity in Vietnam was therefore much stronger than that in China. Yet collectivism is not the only thing that exists in Vietnamese culture. In fact, we should not label entire cultures as individualistic or collectivistic. As James Neuliep points out, persons within each culture may vary considerably. We can, however, measure an individual’s degree of individualism–collectivism. When people manifest individualistic tendencies, Neuliep calls them “idiocentric.” When people manifest collectivistic tendencies, he calls them “allocentric.” Idiocentrism and allocentrism are the individual equivalents of cultural individualism–collectivism. According to this same author, allocentrics tend to define themselves with reference to social entities (e.g., families, hometowns) more so than do idiocentrics. See James W. Neuliep, Intercultural Communication (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publication Inc., 2014), 55.
as possible, and to keep their connections with one another through good relationships rather than legal contracts. They then developed a culture that was built on an agricultural philosophy, which, in turn, led to the formation of synthetic thinking and the establishment of a dialectic approach.\(^{19}\) Consequently, the ancient Vietnamese were not interested in a collection of separate elements, but in the relationship between them. They did not run after justification, argument, verification, reason, rigidity, or monopoly but after subjective experiences, intuition, feelings, flexibility, harmony, collectivity, and cultural/religious diversity.\(^{20}\) These elements became the foundation on which they relied when they needed to discern anything.

2.2. **Multi-religiosity in Vietnamese faith traditions**

Embracing a myth about their origin as children of a sacred dragon from the sea and a goddess from the mountaintop, the Vietnamese people symbolically and theologically view themselves in relation to God and the world. They are children of Heaven (Cha Trời) and Earth (Mẹ Đất). In that sense, they are the fruit of a harmonious marriage between the two sacred entities. Their heavenly parentage offers them what they need: mountains, rivers, lands, trees, and animals. The Vietnamese accept these gifts with gratitude, reverence, and even fear. This leads them to believe in the greater power of nature around them, in the spirits of the unsatisfied dead, and in unexplainable phenomena. Such attitudes developed into the cult of spirits, which became the principal religion in Vietnam.

This cult of spirits, nevertheless, never claimed itself to be absolute. On the contrary, it accepted good teachings from any other religion, even if these teachings came from the outside. Hence, it would not be a surprise to see an animist prostrate herself to Heaven in the

\(^{19}\) Thêm N. Trần, *Tìm Về Bẫn Sắc Văn Hóa Việt Nam*, 124.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 45ff.
morning, reverence Buddha at a pagoda in the afternoon, pray to the Virgin Mary at a Catholic church in the evening, and then later consult with a Taoist priest to understand her fate. She would have no problem worshiping the Almighty God, reverencing the Buddha, respecting Confucius, and honoring her ancestors all at the same time. This practice may even occur among Vietnamese Christians, who live within a cultural framework undergirded by Taoist, Confucian, Buddhist, and animist values and norms mediated through popular proverbs, family rituals, and cultural festivals. In fact, if one scratches the surface of a Vietnamese Catholic, “one will find a Confucian, a Taoist, a Buddhist, or, more often than not, an indistinguishable mixture of the three.”\(^{21}\) Such a mixture, in turn, influences the ways the Vietnamese people practice their faith and discern their ways of living.

2.3. **Adaptability and creativity in Vietnamese ways of living and thinking**

Another unique feature of Vietnamese culture is that, when it interacts with a foreign ideology, it neither rejects nor accepts the entire system. Rather, it receives certain elements belonging to that foreign ideology and then rebuilds them into its own, thus creating new features without losing its core.\(^{22}\) The literal meaning of the invading ideologies is still the same, but the interpretation is modified to suit the circumstances. This was what happened when Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism entered into Vietnam. The following example will demonstrate this point.

Confucianism has always tried to maintain a hierarchical and ordered society. Kings, teachers, parents, men, women, and children must behave according to their role. If they transgress the boundaries of the appropriate role, they upset the system and thereby lead the


\(^{22}\) Thêm N. Trần, *Tìm Về Bản Sắc Văn Hóa Việt Nam*, 518.
entire society into chaos. Although the Vietnamese did not reject this viewpoint, they modified it by adding an emotional element. If Confucianism presented a role of the father as representative of discipline and authority, and thus everyone including his wife had to obey him, the Vietnamese balanced this view by emphasizing the role of the mother who represented nurture and affection. It was she who added a sentimental aspect to Vietnamese culture and made it softer and more humane. In his *Gia Huấn Ca (Familial Sirach)*, Nguyễn Trãi, one of the most famous Vietnamese literati, stressed: “Phúc đức tại mẫu” (meritorious virtue is caused by the maternal). It was a mother’s good conduct that brought felicity to her descendants.23 She could create and change her children’s destinies by her ways of living.

### 2.4. Filial piety and respect for others in Vietnamese culture

In his *The Dead Among Us*, Tuyên Nguyễn asserts: “If harmony is the key to understanding the Vietnamese worldview and ethical framework, then filial piety and veneration of ancestors are the dynamic forces of their social and familial relationships. If the harmony of a family is the center of social cohesion, then the cult of ancestors serves as the glue that binds [the whole] society [together].”24 The cult of ancestors, in fact, is a meeting place for all major religions in Vietnam. Animism always holds filial piety and veneration of ancestors in the highest regard. Confucianism views them as *Thiên Đạo* (the Heavenly Way).

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24 Tuyên Nguyễn, *The Dead Among Us*, 71. This practice left a lasting impression on de Rhodes, to the point that he asserts in one of his books: “There is perhaps no other nation on this inhabited earth that honors and venerates the souls and bodies of the dead more than the people of Tonkin.” (“Trong khắp nơi đất có người ở này, có lẽ không có nước nào trọng kính và tôn sứng hồn và xác người quá cờ bằng dân nước An Nam.”) See Alexandre de Rhodes, S.J., *Lịch Sử Vương Quốc Đàng Ngoài (The History of the Kingdom of Tonkin)*, trans. Xuyên K. Nguyễn (Sài Gòn: Tủ Sách Đại Kết, 1994), 51.
Buddhism considers these two elements as the most important virtues. Taoism sees them as very natural and as things that simply make sense.\(^{25}\)

Filial piety, of course, does not require that people praise everything that the ancestors did. On the contrary, it suggests that, although all ancestors are worthy of respect and reverence, the transgressions of a wicked ancestor will result in bad luck for his or her children and grandchildren. This belief is expressed in a folk saying: “Đờ cha ăn mặn, đờ con khát nước” (if the father eats salty food, his children will be thirsty). Consequently, most Vietnamese try to act appropriately and perform good deeds so that they will not negatively impact the lives of their descendants.

In addition to a desire to leave behind a good legacy and to create a positive impact on the lives of their descendants, the Vietnamese also respect each other in order to save face, both for themselves and for others with whom they interact. They choose to do so because the concept of “face,” in the Vietnamese context, means prestige and dignity; losing it is equal to losing their livelihood.\(^{26}\) Thus, in their daily interaction with one another, people promote a spirit of relying on tình (relationship-base) rather than on lý (rule-base); on hòa nicht bất động (finding harmony even in disagreement) rather than đồng ní bất hòa (sharing the same ideology but always in antagonization); and on the rule to “critique and enrich” rather than “critique and exclude.”\(^{27}\) They understand that exclusivity is always a good recipe for destroying a person’s “face.” Hence, they encourage and challenge each other to live according to the perspective of “Dĩ hòa vi quý” (using a soft answer to turn away wrath), not


\(^{26}\) Thăng Đ. Trương, Confucian Values and School Leadership in Vietnam (Victoria: University of Wellington, 2013), 247.

\(^{27}\) Ngọc V. Nguyên, Cổ Học Tinh Hoa (The Quintessence of Old Teachings) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Học, 2011), 309.
trying to win an argument at the expense of a relationship. These emphases on saving face, preserving a relationship-base, hòa khí bất động, and dĩ hòa vi quý strongly influence the ways that Vietnamese people practice their discernment and obedience.²⁸

All of what has been presented thus far indicates a few things. First, Vietnamese culture is malleable. This characteristic, on the one hand, helps people to accept and adapt to new things. On the other hand, it may lead them to adopt arbitrary convictions, e.g., switching to a new position without much reflection or being consistent in maintaining certain customs. Second, Vietnamese culture is also very communal, which in turn helps people to unite, love, and be closer to one another. Yet this aspect may lead them to rely heavily on others, not taking their responsibility seriously, or not focusing on personal growth. Finally, Vietnamese culture helps people to live a slow and thoughtful life. However, it may lead them to develop an attitude of passiveness, inaccuracy, or authoritarianism. These tendencies may become stumbling blocks preventing them from entering into an authentic discernment.²⁹

Observing these cultural characteristics as outsiders, Westerners who came to Vietnam often had no problem applauding the positive impact of Vietnamese culture, although they at times misunderstood it, and hence failed to recognize its positivity. Nevertheless, they often raised an eyebrow at the negative aspects of this culture. To accurately interpret Vietnamese culture concerning the ways the Vietnamese people think, act, or believe, and to create a forum for a mutually enriched dialogue between East and West, it is helpful to introduce a theory that analyzes the origin of the differences between these two worlds.

²⁸ I will elucidate this point later in Chapter 4 of the thesis.
²⁹ Again, I will elaborate this point further in the fourth chapter.
3. Ký Trương’s theory: the origin of the differences between East and West

In his *Dao Thiên Chúa – Dân Nước Việt* (*Christianity and the People of Vietnam*), Ký Trương, a Vietnamese philosopher, uses the concept of Tĩnh versus Động (static vs. dynamic or passive vs. active) to discuss the origin of the Eastern and Western philosophy. Through this pair of concepts, he proposes a theory explaining why Easterners and Westerners think, act, and live differently. In this theory, Trương reminds readers that agriculture developed very early in Asia. As the first farmers settled in the fields, thus adopting a tĩnh or static way of life, they understood that their harvests would depend on the weather of each year. Hence, they acknowledged their own passivity. They realized that what they sowed in the fields only grew if there was harmony between hot and cold, dry and rain, day and night. They also recognized a harmony in everything around them: when days began, nights slowly followed; when people were born, they gradually moved toward their death. Thus, starting with life experiences, the Asian people steadily came to understand how things in the universe operate. They then invented a philosophy based on the principle of harmony, often known as the principle of Yin and Yang.

The Asian peoples conceived Yin and Yang as the two great opposite but complementary forces at work in the cosmos. Under this principle, people with differences do not have to deny one side to accept the other. Although differences may lead to contradictions, it does not mean that people cannot coexist in harmony, for these

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30 Ký Trương, *Dao Thiên Chúa, Dân Nước Việt* (*Christianity and the People of Vietnam*), 43.
31 Most people believe that the terms Yin and Yang (Âm and Dương in Vietnamese) are borrowed from the Sino-language and that this principle was invented by Chinese philosophers in the third century before Christ. This view is only partly true. According to Thêm Trần, these two words were terms borrowed from the Southern language at a time when people still lived a tribal lifestyle. In that language, Yang meant Heaven and Yin meant Earth. It was the correlation and complementarity between Heaven and Earth that led people to understand and embrace the concept of harmony. The actual principle, however, came to its present formulation when philosophers of the Chinese School of Yinyang in the third century BC studied and systematized this concept and developed it into a philosophical principle. See Thêm Trần, *Tìm Về Bản Sắc Văn Hóa Việt Nam*, 112.
contradictions do not necessarily antagonize each other. On the contrary, they may supplement and support each other. The existence of one element, more often than not, depends on and is a condition for the existence of another. For example, darkness is a condition of light; static is a condition of dynamic; and badness is a condition of goodness. Without the prior, the latter has nothing to compare with, and its concept does not make sense. As a result, Trương continues, Easterners neither seek absolutes nor embrace an either-or approach. Rather, they tend to accept the differences and embrace a both-and method because they often find some truth in contradictory things.\(^{32}\)

Knowing that relativity is an inevitable reality, Easterners rarely tell people one idea is right and another is wrong. Rather, they focus on the complementary, un-separateness, and harmony between the individual and communal elements. Life experience is the focal point. God’s presence in the midst of the human race is the guarantee of all things. Totality is located in the immanent aspect of God.

The idea of a harmonious world that is blessed by the immanent God who is present in its midst is deeply ingrained in Asia. As with many other people living in the world, Easterners accept both transcendent and immanent characteristics of God. Nonetheless, they emphasize the latter, and this emphasis reveals itself, for example, in the way they build their churches. If the architecture of a Western church focuses on the magnificence and height of its tower reaching to Heaven, to the transcendent God, revealing a human thirst for something higher and better, the architecture of a real Eastern church centers on its spread and width to touch the immanent God, showing a human desire to be with God in their present lives. Unlike the Western church, which often sits in an open space, the Eastern

\(^{32}\) Kỳ Trương, *Thiên Chúa Giáo và Tam Giáo* (*Christianity and The Triple Religions*) (Carthage, MO: Tủ Sách Đảm Đạo Tôn Giáo, 2000), 47–49.
church frequently hides behind a big tree, a corner of a mountain, or near a riverbank. Who is God to them if not the Incarnate One existing in all things, especially in nature, and intermingling in the world He creates and loves? His revelations penetrate through the nature around them, and human beings can do nothing but gaze at all things to feel His existence and love for them.  

Different from the Eastern philosophy, Kỳ Trương suggests, the Western philosophy originated in hunting and nomadic life. It was a life that constantly required moving to search for a better place to live, thus resulting in a dynamic existence and consistently choosing the best animal among the flock to raise a new herd. Consequently, Westerners actively intervened in the affairs of nature. They are inclined to distinguish white from black, day from night, strong from weak, good from bad, and true from false. They would not accept the idea that there is good in bad things nor would they conceive contrasting terms as complementary and necessary parts of a whole. Reason, understanding, judgment, authenticity, and dignity are the focal points. The concept of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent God becomes an essential concept because this God will ensure the accuracy of all human reason, understanding, and judgment. Totality, to Westerners, is to move intelligently toward self-transcendence.

The contrast between the procedures of people whose ancestors were farmers and those whose ancestors were hunters explains why people think, act, argue, discern, and live differently. Based on this theory, Trương suggests that when Westerners thirst for something that is higher and better, given that understanding, reason and good judgment are their focal points, they will most likely use distinctions, induction, deduction, classification, analysis, or ontological relations to argue and justify their claims. On the contrary, when Easterners

33 Ibid., 110, 228, 231 and 286.
search for something that is deeper, broader, and more complementary, given that their focal point is life experience, they are inclined to use intuition, stories, songs, poems, symbols, and synthesis to demonstrate their points.

Note that Trương’s theory does not encourage people to embrace one approach and reject the other. Nor does he want to persuade them to view everything (including their focuses, questions, values, or life) as relative. Trương is conscious of the fact that, concerning Vietnamese culture, many things need to be clarified and re-examined. An emphasis on collective values over those of the individual, or a focus on communal harmony, is an example of the sort of thing that needs to be clarified and reexamined. Without clarification and reexamination, one may mistakenly view these two elements as hindrances preventing an individual from exercising his or her freedom to flourish. These unclear elements will present many difficulties. They may even prevent people from expanding their horizons, and may imprison them within walls from which they would rather escape.

Undeniably, Trương’s theory attempts to identify the root of the distinctions between Eastern and Western ways of thinking and living. These differences explain why Easterners and Westerners use different methods to discern and why they have different focuses when they practice their obedience. The subsequent chapters will elaborate on this point.

4. Positive and negative influences of East–West differences on Jesuit missions in Vietnam


Given this analysis of the origin of East–West distinctions, can we explain how these differences influenced the successes or failures of Jesuit missionaries who tried to be inculturated into Vietnamese culture? I argue for an affirmative answer. Indeed, because of

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34 Thêm Trần also discusses this topic in his Tìm Về Bản Sắc Văn Hóa Việt Nam, 45–50.
their emphasis on the collective, the Vietnamese tend to take on themselves a responsibility to observe and evaluate a situation to see if they can learn something new or offer some help. This curiosity became a precious opportunity for Jesuit missionaries. In chapter 6 of the *History of the Kingdom of Tonkin*, de Rhodes describes situations in which many local people came to his newly built churches. They curiously listened to his preaching and eventually converted to Catholicism.\(^\text{35}\) Although it was curiosity that initially led them to de Rhodes, curiosity was not the reason for their conversion. Rather, it was the openness and tolerance of other religions acquired from the agricultural culture and years of practicing animism that brought them to Christianity. Such openness and tolerance helped the Vietnamese to value rather than look down upon traditions that were different from theirs. It also helped them to accept Christian doctrine and seek to harmonize it with their own.

Another difference that turned out to benefit the missionary work was that the Vietnamese prioritized filial piety and hierarchical relationships, especially those exemplified by the King, Teacher, or Father (*Quân–Sư–Phụ*). If a father, for instance, converted to Christianity and wanted his wife and children to follow suit, they would have to do so. De Rhodes shares the story of a high-ranking officer in Tonkin who expressed his desire for the entire family to follow his example and become Catholics. He even warned his children that he would disown them if they refused his request. Out of filial piety, his children immediately complied.\(^\text{36}\)

The third positive influence of East–West differences on Jesuit missions in Vietnam was the fact that all missionaries came from countries whose cultures were very different from those of Vietnam. These missionaries were well aware that they would not be tightly


\(^{36}\) Ibid., 133. I will discuss the negativity of this approach in Chapter 4 of this thesis.
bound by local traditions and customs. Thus, they could study Vietnamese culture as much as they liked. Though cultural accommodation was an approach they adopted for their missions in Vietnam, it did not mean that they could not challenge or be critical of what they believed was not compatible with Christianity. The local people might feel uncomfortable with the Western way of proceeding (e.g., being direct, not worrying overmuch about seeking harmony and complementarity between religions or about saving face). They might even think of that approach as rude and imprudent. Nevertheless, they would let it go with the excuse that these missionaries did not know because they were foreigners. This phenomenon could benefit Jesuit missions in Vietnam.

Yet another positive influence of East–West differences on Jesuit missions in Vietnam was the docility and open-mindedness of the local people.37 In chapter 2 of his *History of the Kingdom of Tonkin*, de Rhodes reminds his Western readers that the Tonkinese remained open-minded and docile. They would listen to and follow those whom they trusted, especially those who could speak the local language and understand its culture. Given such characteristics, de Rhodes concludes that the Vietnamese could easily accept the Christian truth, and thus a decision to send missionaries who could speak the local language and start a mission in this land should not have been delayed.38 Indeed, it was these characteristics that helped de Rhodes gather good fruit when he was in Tonkin: within three years (1627–1630), de Rhodes baptized more than 5,000 Vietnamese.39

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37 The Vietnamese acquired these characteristics from their agricultural culture, which leaned toward harmony, complementarity, a static lifestyle, adaptation, and religious diversity.
4.2. **Negative influences of East–West differences on Jesuit missions in Vietnam**

Of course, East–West distinctions also had many negative influences on Jesuit missions in Vietnam. The first negative influence was the difference in methodology. As previously mentioned, if Easterners tended to embrace a *both-and* approach, their Western counterparts leaned toward an *either-or* method. If Easterners encouraged people to seek complementarity between things, as long as they did not upset the harmony of the community, Westerners looked for absoluteness and certainty. For example, unlike Confucianism, Taoism, or Buddhism, Christianity demanded a definite decision: one had to choose God or ancestors, monogamy or polygamy, morality or immorality. It seemed that, in the teaching of the missionaries at that time, there was no room for the *both-and* approach.

This difference reached its climax when it came to the interpretation of the veneration of ancestors. The Vietnamese saw this practice as a way to express their gratefulness and connectedness to those who went before them. Jesuit missionaries sometimes accepted this viewpoint and saw it as harmless to Christian faith; therefore, it could be permissible. De Rhodes himself writes: “[Concerning the practice of filial piety], if there are some rituals that Vietnamese Christians will not perform out of their fear of sinning, then a majority of these rituals are harmless and hence, I judge that they could be maintained without violating the holiness of our religion.”

Other times, these missionaries interpreted it as an act of worshiping the mortal, and thus an unacceptable act. In the same book, de Rhodes talks about the Proconsul of Phú Yên who, on the one hand, refused to give up his practice of publicly

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40 “Thực ra nếu có một vài nghi lễ giáo dấn không nên làm vì sợ tội, thì đa số kế như vô thưởng vô phạt và cùng tội cho là có thể được dự trì mà không phạm tội sự thành thiện của đạo ta.” See Alexandre de Rhodes, S.J., *Hành Trình và Truyền Giáo (The Travels and Missions)*, 7.
venerating a famous army hero, but on the other hand, wanted to become a Christian. Unlike Mateo Ricci, who would see this practice as solely a political and cultural act, de Rhodes interpreted it as an idolatrous one. Because of that, he strictly forbade it and demanded a definitive decision to give it up—or else he would not baptize the man.42

Facing a situation in which many Vietnamese Christians were asked to renounce a practice that could be seen as a core part of Vietnamese identity, involving the foundational Vietnamese concept of a harmonious relationship between the living and the dead, civil leaders at that time grew furious. To them, the matter was not one of worshipping the only true God, as the Christians often claimed. Rather, the problem was that the renunciation of ancient practices could potentially become a threat to the unity of the country, its national spirit, and its political stability. Moreover, it might lead people to be ungrateful to their ancestors, heroes, and the founders of various fields. Such an attitude, the civil leaders at that time insisted, would destroy the fabric of the entire society.43

Another negative influence of East–West differences on Jesuit missions in Vietnam was the collective and hierarchical emphasis. When Jesuit missionaries came and preached the Gospel message to the local people, the Vietnamese had a great interest in what they were hearing. Yet, in the end, many decided not to convert because their lords had not done so.44 Their decision did not come from a so-called “monkey see monkey do” behavior. Rather, it

41 De Rhodes does not mention the name of this army hero. However, this figure was probably Guan Yu (關公 in Chinese or Quan Công in Vietnamese), one of the most famous generals of the Eastern Han dynasty. He was well known for his deeds and morality. Consequently, high-ranking officers in many Asian countries, including Vietnam, viewed him as their patron saint. They thus often showed deep respect for him through an act of prostrating themselves in front of his altar. It is important to take note that prostrating oneself in front of an altar (e.g., of ancestors or kings or national heroes) or a live person does not necessarily mean that one is worshiping them. It is only an Asian way to express deep respect for that figure. Most often, missionaries interpreted this act as worshipping, and de Rhodes was no exception.

42 Alexandre de Rhodes, S.J., Hành Trình và Truyền Giáo (The Travels and Missions), 34.


44 Jesuit missionaries were well aware of this issue. Thus they often tried to convert from the top down in the hope that everybody at the grassroots would follow the example of their leaders.
arose from a competition between being loyal to Thiên Từ (i.e., the king who was considered to be a son of God) and listening to God’s truth (i.e., the Gospel message). Which one should they follow? How could they discern and make a decision? What reasons did they have? Was their final decision due simply to legal boundaries and economic gain or to something deeper? Chapter 4 of this thesis will address these questions.

The third negative influence of East–West differences on Jesuit missions in Vietnam was the prospect of a religious monopoly. Unlike the Vietnamese religious system, which had no problem with incorporating insights from other faith traditions into its own, Christianity always insisted on its absoluteness. Although Jesuit missionaries at that time did not reject the value of harmony or tolerance, they drew a line in the sand: there would be no salvation outside the Catholic Church, and this Church was the only true Church and religion. Theologically speaking, one could neither blame the Jesuit missionaries in Vietnam for their stand nor force them to accept other religions as being equally valid. Their position, however, caused many tensions and even led to severe persecution. It was this view that prompted Vietnamese Christians to embrace an overzealous approach: they searched for anything that they thought to be idolatrous in their home and publicly destroyed it. Many pictures and statues of local gods were reduced to ashes.\(^{45}\) Though Jesuit missionaries did not endorse or demand such an act from the Vietnamese Christians, their insistence on an absolute church did not help to mitigate the overzealousness of these new converts. How could they publicly express a definite disconnection with their idolatrous past if not through this action?

Also because of the conviction that they belonged to the only true religion, some Jesuit missionaries did not recognize a need to dialogue with other faiths, especially

Buddhism and Taoism. These missionaries forgot that “they did not work in a vacuum and that the Europeans were one group among many in a spiritual market where different teachings compete for attention.”\textsuperscript{46} The presence of Buddhist and Taoist priests constantly reminded them of this fact. With their strong convictions regarding their own religious monopoly and absoluteness, these missionaries unconsciously failed to search for a middle ground and always demanded a decisive break with the false religious past. Sending away concubines, eating meat if one had practiced Buddhist vegetarianism, and letting go of any ritual suspected of being idolatrous (even if the person did it only for a political or social reason) were examples of such a demand. Most often, these requirements became a non-negotiable condition for baptism.\textsuperscript{47}

Undeniably, an either-or dichotomy did not allow them to feel at ease with half-measures. Furthermore, because of this dichotomy, although many Jesuit missionaries genuinely wanted to talk to people, they unintentionally talked down to them. Alternatively, when they wanted to listen to local people, they listened selectively. In the words of Anthony Gittins’ \textit{Gifts and Strangers}:

They [the missionaries] may well have set themselves to learn from people, but primarily and paradoxically as their teachers. They have brought a clear message to people, but often in the wrong language. Their language and listening, their

\textsuperscript{46} Liam Matthew Brockey, \textit{Journey to the East} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 296. Liam Brockey summarizes this phenomenon with a vivid description: “Many times, they [missionaries] refused to enter into dialogue with these Asian traditions and appeared to have remained largely ignorant of their complexities. These missionaries knew full well that they were not in Catholic Europe, where the combination of royal and ecclesiastical power enforced religious exclusivity. Likewise, they knew that they were not in the Amazonian jungle or the baronies of the Japanese daimyo where the conversions of the elite had led to forced transformations of the religious landscape... Here in Asia, various religious traditions had relatively existed harmoniously side by side. For instance, the presence of pagodas could be found not only in temples but also in private homes. Moreover, the moral standards of Buddhism and Confucianism ran parallel to each other. This made the demand of exclusive attention to Christianity much harder. For indeed, the Jesuits not only needed to show that Christianity is a true religion surpassing all others but also needed to help people to discern whether Buddhist teachings came from a true or a false God. If it came from a false God then why does its moral teaching go so well with the moral standards of Confucianism which the Jesuits seemed to accept, at least in theory?” See ibid., 297–299.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 300–302.
relationships and teaching have been impregnated with power and the control of initiatives, with righteousness and certainty.\textsuperscript{48}

All of the negative influences of East–West differences mentioned above were not only hindrances to the missionary work but were also responsible for the failure of the Jesuit missionaries who tried to be inculturated into Vietnamese society. To a certain extent, these negative influences still exist and continue to bring difficulties to the mission of the Christian church in Vietnam these days. It will be necessary, then, to identify the issues at stake.

5. Remaining issues

The first issue relates to the pastoral aspect of the missions. Although there is nothing wrong with being passionate and zealous, such an attitude must still be checked. A Jesuit missionary who came to a foreign land trying to spread the Good News, for example, should not have forgotten that he was first and foremost a disciple of the loving Christ. The method he used, thus, had to be pastoral. Everything he did should have reflected a spirit of respect, compassion, and understanding. There was no doubt that, in an unfamiliar country, this missionary would face the pressure of being a stranger, which would make him feel vulnerable. Therefore, he might adopt a “rigid” rather than a “relaxed attitude” to the hosts and become “serious and tight-lipped” rather than “jovial and spontaneous.”\textsuperscript{49} He might have a tendency to impose his own set of values onto others without paying much attention to the cultural and spiritual elements that were important to those whom he evangelized. He probably was not aware of the fact that, by imposing his culture onto another, he desacralized


\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 124.
the other culture and thereby threatened its existence. If this happened, the other culture
could not exist because its direction was lost. This situation was often the case in Vietnam.50

The next important issue one needs to deal with is whether Christianity ever felt at
home in Vietnam. On the one hand, within a very short time, more than a hundred thousand
Vietnamese were baptized and became Catholics.51 Such a quick development suggested that
Christianity enjoyed a certain level of comfort in its new home. On the other hand, did this
comfort come from a true feeling of “being at home”—and if it did, what did it mean? Did it
mean that it was a European home built in a foreign land? Alternatively, was it a home that
was totally transformed into an authentic Vietnamese one? Or was it an integrated home in
which the core European characteristics were still there yet enriched by those of the local
people?

Not only should one ask whether Christianity felt at home in this host nation, but also
one should wonder whether the Vietnamese people truly accepted Christianity as part of their
own. The second part of the question is equally important because, as Quý Hoàng, a
Vietnamese Jesuit philosopher, suggests: “To be accepted as a family member (John 1:11),

50 A quick example may demonstrate this point. Most missionaries (including de Rhodes) always
insisted on giving new Vietnamese converts Christian names. Many missionaries even thought of this action as
an act of definitively disconnecting from the past and being reborn in Christ. They did not know that naming a
child in Vietnamese society was an art that needed proper discernment. On the one hand, the art reflected a
desire to give the child a name that could continue to bear the familial legacy. On the other hand, the name
needed to provide that child with its uniqueness without upsetting the spirits or being disrespectful to the
ancestors or other elders in the family. Therefore, one could not use an ancestor’s or other elder’s name for the
child because it could be seen as non-hierarchical and disrespectful. Neither could one give a name that was too
foreign or else the child would be viewed as a stranger. Giving a name such as Mary, Joseph, John, or Paul to a
new convert thus violated both norms. Vietnamese non-Christians could not understand why the Catholics
disrespectfully gave the holy name of an ancestor, such as Mary, to a living person. Nor did they understand the
reasons for which missionaries used so many names that were very alien to Vietnamese culture (e.g., Francis,
Andre, or Augustine). Historically speaking, this caused problems for record-keeping as well. All we know for
Vietnamese converts after their baptism are names such as Andre Phú Yên, or Joseph Tri. When we research
these people, we have no clue who they were except that they were baptized and that they came from a certain
city (e.g., Phú Yên, in Andre Phú Yên’s case). This is why the Society of Jesus in Vietnam still struggles to
reconstruct an accurate account of the first Vietnamese Jesuits who joined the Society during that time.

51 Indeed, Jesuit missionaries began to work in Vietnam in 1615. Within a very short time (15 years),
these missionaries had already brought 100,000 Vietnamese people to the new faith. See Chính Q. Đỗ, S.J.,
Christianity must be *Vietnamized*. It must be expressed by the categories and symbols of the East so that it can be nurtured by the Vietnamese spiritual energy.”

According to Hoàng, engagement between Christianity and Vietnamese culture is a dual process: one cannot *Christianize* Vietnamese culture without being *Vietnamized* by the latter. In reality, some missionaries such as Francisco de Pina, Cristoforo Borri, and Alexandre de Rhodes tried to do so. De Rhodes, for example, invented a Vietnamese version of the catechism. This effort has never been consistently followed. Hence, many Vietnamese people (even today) still view Christianity as well as Ignatian spirituality as a foreign entity.

The next issue is linguistics. How does one choose a correct term for God? This is a crucial question that most missionaries in Asia had to answer. Ricci in China chose *Thiên Chủ* (天) as an equivalent term. These words literally mean the “Lord of Heaven,” and do not necessarily reflect the omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent God. De Rhodes chose the phrase “Đức Chúa Cả Trời Đất” (the Most Honorable Lord of Heaven and Earth) to talk about God. Though this phrase was much better, de Rhodes still admitted that, because of the complexity of the Vietnamese language, no proper equivalent term could truly satisfy him.

Compounding the problem, the Vietnamese people used the word “thờ” broadly and generously. This word could mean to worship, to venerate, to honor, and to respect. In a given context, the local people might know the difference between the meanings because each reflected a particular hierarchical priority. For instance, people could use the same word “thờ” for God, ancestors, Buddha or Confucius. In the order of hierarchical priority, the term

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53 Ibid.

when used for God meant to worship; for ancestors, to venerate; for Buddha, to honor; and for Confucius, to respect. To translate this word correctly into English without creating any ambiguity, one would have to distinguish the meanings: “I worship God, venerate my ancestor, honor Buddha, and respect Confucius.” Confusingly, the Vietnamese people used the term “thờ” indistinguishably in all situations, and the missionaries did not understand this complexity. Therefore, when they heard a local person say: “Tôi thờ ông bà” (I worship/venerate/honor/respect my ancestors), they interpreted this statement and this practice as an act of worshiping the ancestors idolatrously.55

The fourth issue is whether a mutual exchange between Jesuit missionaries and the Vietnamese people truly took place. The exchange of goods between the Spanish and Portuguese traders with the Tonkinese and Cochinchinese occurred quite often in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. Most Jesuit missionaries followed these traders to enter into Vietnam. To these missionaries, Christianity had so much to give. Hence, unlike the Spanish and Portuguese traders who practiced the so-called “give and take,” the missionaries only let the exchange flow one way. They wanted the local people to take Christianity but refused to receive the gift of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and animism that the Vietnamese wanted to offer. In doing so, Chính Đỗ, a renowned Vietnamese Jesuit historian, laments that these missionaries indirectly told the local people that they did not want to recognize the values and life of Vietnam’s major religions.56

55 This phenomenon indicates the limitations of human language, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, it reminds us of the extent to which life can be culturally and contextually conditioned. If one is not willing to walk out of oneself and see things through the lens of another, one will misinterpret and misunderstand the other.
Of course, Christianity or any other religion is not merchandise; and hence, a request to exchange it would be considered absurd. Even if it were a commodity, no one would ever trade the best for the worse, for, what else could be compared or equal to a religion that was formed by the Lord Himself? This logic makes sense. Yet it can be a topic for discernment because there is a difference between exchanging to replace and exchanging to enrich. Moreover, if the latter (exchanging to enrich) does not take place, the Vietnamese converts cannot bring values belonging to their previous faith tradition into the current practice. Nor can they use these values to assist in the process of discernment if they attempt to discern according to the Ignatian tradition. If that is the case, it seems that they have to be Westerners to use the Ignatian method.

The last significant issue is whether these missionaries discerned the works of the Holy Spirit, which had been present even before their arrival; and whether they should have proceeded differently given this important fact. In a pluralistic and changing world, cultures are not everlasting. They are subject to change and decay. Thus, on the one hand, a healthy engagement between Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture must include a discernment that acknowledges, identifies, and criticizes what is hostile to this spirituality and the Gospel message. On the other hand, such discernment must also reflect on the context of the Vietnamese setting to see what has already borne good fruit according to the will of God under the influence of His grace. In other words, instead of just focusing on what goes wrong, one needs to pay attention to what goes right with the situation as well. In doing so, one will be amazed at the honorable and praiseworthy works of the Spirit, even in a non-Christian land. Jesuit missionaries in Vietnam during the seventeenth century seemed to focus more on “what went wrong” rather than the other aspect. As a result, they were at times
insensitive to the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit in other religions, and therefore forgot that people could encounter the Spirit within their context.

Certainly, discerning God’s will is not only necessary for missionary work but also for the life of the whole person. Ignatian spirituality is known for its emphasis on discernment. The next chapter will explore this concept and study how it relates to other important aspects in one’s life, particularly the issue of obedience.
Chapter Three

Ignatian Discernment and Its Relationship to Obedience

Throughout the history of the Society of Jesus, discernment and obedience always play a significant role in helping Jesuits to fulfill their missions. This role is so essential that the Society has to declare in one of its norms: “If we are to receive and to fulfill our mission through obedience, we must be faithful to that practice of spiritual apostolic discernment, both personal and in community, so central to our way of proceeding, as rooted in the Spiritual Exercises and the Constitutions.”¹ The reason underlying this emphasis is that with the assistance of discernment and obedience, each member of this religious order can become “a more fit instrument of Christ in His Church, to assist souls for God’s greater glory.”²

Given the great importance of these two features, this chapter will present an overview of Ignatian discernment, its theological ground and goal. The chapter will also discuss the theological foundation of obedience and elaborate why this practice becomes a crucial element for those who want to dedicate their lives to God. The latter part of the chapter will study the relationship between discernment and obedience: how they inform, support, challenge, and influence each other to achieve the end goal, which is to do what pleases God most so as to glorify His Name. Finally, the chapter will analyze a few obstacles that may hinder the way one practices one’s discernment and obedience. Bringing those hindrances to the level of consciousness will help one to discern well and thereby live a more authentic life.

1. Ignatian discernment

1.1. An overview of Ignatian discernment

The Meriam Webster Dictionary defines discernment as “the quality of being able to grasp and comprehend what is obscure.” Once a person can do so, he or she has a basis on which to respond with certain actions. Most often, the final act is not as important as the relationship between the person and other factors such as people, things, and situations. Similar to this general understanding, Ignatian discernment also refers to a way of seeing and orienting oneself toward a relationship with other elements in one’s life. Yet, unlike any other process, Ignatian discernment always places God at its center. It encourages people to reflect and discover for themselves a way to live out their call to praise, reverence and serve the Lord. Viewing the process through that lens, David Lonsdale defines discernment in the following way:

Ignatian Discernment is an art of appreciating the gifts that God has given us and discovering how we may best respond to that love in daily life. It is a process of finding one’s own way of discipleship in a particular set of circumstances; a means of responding to the call of Christian love and truth in a situation when there are often conflicting interests and values and choices have to be made.

Since Ignatian discernment is an invitation to discover the best response to the love that one receives from God, it requires a sensitive religious ear. When one tries to discern what to do or how to live one’s life in a manner appropriate to the Gospel, for example, one should wonder whether one can internalize the mind of Christ accurately. Such knowledge is not simply a matter of clarity, because as William Spohn points out, “our immaturity and reluctance may cloud our perception,” and “the contagion of sin has damaged our hearing

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4 Sp.Ex. #23.
[and hence], if we do not render, we will be quite deaf to the values of Christ.” To develop a good religious ear, one needs conversion, healing, and the gradual sanctification that comes from God’s grace through a faithful community.

Ignatian discernment, therefore, is a growth process in which one discerns one’s possibilities while leaving the door of one’s soul open so that the grace of the Holy Spirit can enter. With the help of this grace, one can test actions and attitudes against a way of life to determine whether they fit and whether they help one to respond positively and appreciatively to God’s love. This grace also helps one to understand that the prime concern of one’s discernment is not so much about the morality of one’s actions, but rather, about “how the Lord is affecting and moving [one] deep in [one’s] own affective consciousness.”

One then will be able to discern the will of God, say yes to it, and let the Lord take care of the rest. In other words, one will propose one’s desire to the Lord and let Him dispose of one’s destiny. With the assistance of this attitude and the working of the Holy Spirit, one can reach an indifferent status, in which one will either take or reject a certain thing not for its own sake, but for the end for which one is created.

To reach this indifferent status and to listen to God’s voice, one needs to pay attention to the patterns of one’s life, to the movement of the spirits, and to the presence of God in each moment of the day. The “Examen,” the “Rules for the Discernment of Spirits,” and the various meditations on Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection in the Spiritual Exercises become good tools assisting one to reach this position. Ignatian discernment, however, does not aim at providing an assurance that one can identify and know with absolute certainty about God’s

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will for oneself. Nor does it insist that whatever one believes to be the will of God is
complete and irrevocable. Jules Toner asserts:

God’s will, which is sought through discernment, is not an element of God’s
complete and irrevocable plan prior to our exercise of freedom and independent of it.
What His will may be at the next step depends on what is freely chosen now… The
divine call expresses God’s preference, without necessitating that the person does
what God prefers. It is a call not merely to do some act but to choose freely that act
rather than some other alternative and to choose it because it is what God prefers. 9

Toner’s assertion reaffirms the focus of Ignatian discernment: it is about
relationships, especially with the Lord. Hence, Ignatian discernment is neither an entrance
into new knowledge nor a way of tapping into God’s mind for information on whether the
Blue Jays or some other team will win the next game. It is not a promise of rightness or
wrongness, of being correct or incorrect, of not making a mistake, or of not failing. Rather, it
is always a comparative study. David Fleming suggests that “To discern in the Ignatian
tradition is to take the various knowledges, which we have or which we can gather about a
situation or a choice, which is before us and to place them up against our own living and
deciding as Jesus lived and decided.”10 In short, Ignatian discernment takes the focus off
oneself and one’s decision and fixes it rather on the relationship with God.

1.2. Theological ground and goals of Ignatian discernment

As we discussed in the first chapter, the purpose for the existence of the Society of
Jesus is to follow Christ, glorify His Father’s name, and obey His will. It is thus
understandable for Ignatius to develop a discernment process that is built on a foundation of
love embodied in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. David Lonsdale reminds his readers that
in a framework of prayer based on the work of God and especially God’s love manifested in

David Fleming, S.J. (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 76.
the life of Christ, which most fully embodied the reign of God, people will realize that Jesus’
ministry was shaped by love; and in the reference of such a love, their discernment has its
firm foundation. When people contemplate Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, they begin
to deepen their awareness and be attentive to the way Jesus relates to His Father and the way
He chooses and decides in light of this relationship. They then realize that their following
Christ does not come from a personal initiation, but from Jesus’ call.

For example, in the meditation on “The Call of The King,” Ignatius advises people to
beg for the grace not to be deaf to that call in whatever ways it comes into their lives. People can hear and have a generous response to Jesus’ call, but they cannot claim that such
generosity comes from them. Rather, it comes from the gratuitous grace of God, and thus,
they simply cooperate in waiting for the coming of that grace. Likewise, in the meditation on
the “Two Standards,” Ignatius wants people to recognize that Jesus challenges them with
their value systems and invites them into His own. This challenge is so great that people
first pray for understanding, and then for being received into Jesus’ way of valuing life, a life
that focuses on a journey to love and follow the will of the Father. This holy love and will of
God become a firm theological ground upon which their discernment stands.

Because the theological foundation of Ignatian discernment is the love that Jesus has
for His Father and His desire to fulfill the will of the Father, its goal, therefore, is not so
much about choosing something that is thought to be objectively better. Rather, it is about
following Christ and being open to responding to Him. Similarly, Ignatian discernment does
not limit itself to what prudence or common sense dictate, although common sense and
prudence have a part to play in discernment, and thus they are not excluded. David Lonsdale

12 Sp.Ex. #91.
points out: “The ultimate guide for our choice is our own appreciation of what it means in practice here and now to love as Jesus loved.”

In addition to the goal of learning to love as Jesus loves, Ignatian discernment also encourages people to allow the Spirit of God to shape not only their actions, but also their hearts—the center from which those actions flow. Thus, its goal is to assist people to respond in their daily life to the call of the Spirit: to let God’s will be done. By letting the will of God be done, people allow the Holy Spirit to transform them and receive them in the image and likeness of God. They then can “be on the journey toward being what God would have them to be, toward the fullness of life.”

To walk firmly on the journey toward being what God would have one to be, one needs to have good listening skills. One can learn this skill from Christ who is the perfect listener. In fact, in the process of discerning the will of God as described in the Spiritual Exercises, one’s listening is a participation in that of Jesus. Through the very act of paying attention to the movement of the spirits, to the inner feelings that arise when one meditates on Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, and to a deep desire to respond to God, one has begun to participate in the way Jesus listens to His Father.

Of course, listening and wanting to respond wholeheartedly to God does not mean that one should do it in the absence of a free will. Ignatian discernment is rooted not in coercion but love. Ignatius himself understands that God’s will for humans is that they should learn to respond in freedom to God and to give shape to their individual and common lives in freedom by the choice that they made. Thus, although toward the end of the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius expresses the hope that one can offer everything back to God, including

15 Ibid., 137.
one’s liberty, memory, understanding and will, such an offer still comes from a free and loving heart.\textsuperscript{16} Moreover, as a follower of Christ who desires to do everything for God’s greater glory, Ignatius knows that one cannot truly discern without God’s grace and that such discernment does not mean much if it comes from coercion. It will be helpful, then, to quickly review the Christian concepts of grace and freedom.

1.3. \textit{Grace and freedom: their role in the process of discerning and obeying}

Augustine defines grace as “that by which alone humans are delivered from evil, and without which they do absolutely no good thing, whether in thought, or will and affection, or in action; not only in order that they may know, by the manifestation of that grace, what should be done, but moreover in order that, by its enabling, they may do with love what they know.”\textsuperscript{17} An important message one can draw from Augustine’s definition is that without God’s grace, one cannot do any good thing including obeying God’s will. This message leads one to a dilemma. On the one hand, according to the Christian conviction, the whole point of one’s existence is to obey God and glorify His name, not by infusions of power, but by consent to one’s Creator in the proper exercise of one’s mind, will, and affections. On the other hand, one cannot categorize obedience by a supernatural infusion as obedience in consent. In fact, without a free approval of the will, such obedience is not a free act, and hence, its authenticity is at stake. It is legitimate to ask the question that Joseph Haroutunian once asked: “How is obedience to God a free act when it is dictated or influenced by an outside force? Moreover, if human actions are not free, then do they truly have freedom?”\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Sp. Ex.} #234.
\textsuperscript{17} St. Augustine, \textit{A Treatise on Rebuke and Grace} (Aeterna Press, Kindle Edition), Locations 66–68.
\textsuperscript{18} This dilemma is the center of the Augustinian-Pelagian controversy. Unlike Augustine, Pelagius maintains the position that human beings can obey the will of God even without grace. If they cannot, they should not be blamed or held responsible for not doing what they are not capable of. Thus, not carrying out God’s will may not be a sin. Augustine rejects this idea because it contradicts the Christian conviction that it is
To address this dilemma, Augustine elaborates his view on grace: “God begins His influence by working in us that we may have a will, He then completes it by working with us when we have the will.” To Augustine, as pointed out in Lonergan’s *Grace and Freedom*, there are two graces separated by a notable interval of time. “The first grace is operative inasmuch as it initiates and causes [the] efficacious good will, making what already was a will into a good and right will, and the second is co-operative inasmuch as it aids good will to execute good intention.” It appears that with the first grace, there is no need for human cooperation. With the second, a human response is necessary. If people respond negatively (e.g., refuse to work with God’s cooperating grace), their will cannot be made perfect. If people respond positively, they will be able to carry out their good intention. This cooperation is where human freedom enters and functions.

Unlike Augustine, Thomas Aquinas sees God’s grace in terms of a single grace that is both operative and cooperative. It is operative when God alone acts. It is cooperative when both God and the human will combine to produce an effect. To Aquinas, Lonergan continues in the same book, human activities are divided into two phases: “The first phase is where they [human activities] are governed and thus, need a divine operation. In the second phase, they govern, and thus, a theorem of cooperation necessarily follows.” This does not mean that human beings have no freedom. On the contrary, they still have their free choice of the will, but before they will, God must prepare it for them. In other words, people are free to choose whether to accept God’s grace or not.

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21 Ibid., 137.
22 Karl Rahner explains the reason for preparation: “Human freedom has not been destroyed by original sin, it has nevertheless been deeply wounded; hence though God need not completely re-create it, it yet needs his loving help. Injured freedom must accept this help freely, yet it cannot do even this on its own
only after the reception of God’s grace, which enables them to be free. How then do grace and freedom play their roles in discernment and obedience?

One can answer the above question with this summary. From eternity God always loves human beings and desires to share with them His eternal life. The only way for them to share this everlasting life is to listen, accept, and obey God’s Word. Given the effects of original sin, humans cannot do so without God’s assistance. Thus, God offers His Son and His gratuitous gifts to them. As discussed in the previous pages, there is an aspect of God’s grace that initiates and causes the efficacious good will. There is another aspect of His grace that requires human cooperation once the initiated will is formed. Under the influence of God’s grace, humans can use what is given to them—their faith, intellect, and feelings—to discern whether they want to obey and carry out the will of God. It also helps them to recognize God’s will in and through the will of those who are in authority. It is this freedom that ensures the possibility of accepting or rejecting God if they choose to do so.

Since this second chapter is not about how to discern according to the Ignatian tradition, a detailed procedure is, therefore, unnecessary. Nevertheless, it may be helpful if one can at least have a sense of how this practice unfolds. An overview of the Ignatian way of discerning will then be essential.

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23 According to Thomas Aquinas, a free act has four presuppositions: (1) a field of action in which more than one course of action is objectively possible; (2) an intellect that is able to work out more than one course of action; (3) a will that is not automatically determined by the first course of action that occurs in the intellect; (4) a will that moves itself. See Bernard Lonergan, S.J., *Grace and Freedom*, 95–96.

Concerning the process of discernment, even under the influence of God’s grace, two courses of action are objectively possible: to obey or disobey God. When discerning, people will use everything that is available (experience, intellect, or feelings) to work out these actions. This process invites them, first, to appreciate the love and gifts that God has given them; second, to discover how they may best respond to that love and find their own way of discipleship in a particular set of circumstances; third, to compare possible options to see which one will please God most, and finally, to come to a decision to either obey or disobey God and carry out that decision. Comparing these points to the four aforementioned presuppositions, an act of discerning God’s will fits the description of a free act.
1.4. A typical process of Ignatian discernment

A typical Ignatian discernment includes five steps. First, one needs to identify a decision that one faces or an issue that needs to be resolved. This decision must be either indifferent or good. One then examines the underlying values (e.g., human, Christian, and spiritual values) and personal concerns involved in the second step. Through reflection, one tries to clarify the values at stake and then asks oneself whether those values are worth pursuing. In the third step, one strives for a state of inner freedom, openness, and balance, which allows one beforehand not to incline toward one option rather than another, but to let one’s preference be shaped by the single criterion of what will enhance one’s ability to love God and to embody that love for others in the concrete context of one’s life.

Next, one takes the time to pray over the matter and pay attention to how one is being led. This step moves one’s reflection into the context of prayer, in which one asks for God’s guidance and tries to be sensitive to how one is being drawn when the matter is brought to prayer. Note that the issue of interpreting and evaluating one’s feelings in discernment is not so much about where the movement of feelings is coming from (though knowledge of

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25 Sp.Ex. #170. In other words, the choice must be between two good things or two indifferent things, but not between a good thing and a bad thing.

26 In this process, God can influence our thoughts as well as our feelings of consolation and desolation in prayer. As Paul Gallagher points out in his Clashing Symbols, “consolation is a matter of cultivating positive thinking. It is a faith-based experience, a sense of expanding in harmony with what is deepest in us, the Spirit in us. It is an experience of being-in-tune-with-Christ and moving towards gospel vision and values. Desolation is the contrary experience of distance, disharmony, disconnection, distrust perhaps of everything and everyone. It is more a matter of paralysis than of positive movement. The consolation is like open hands, ready to receive. Desolation is like closed fists, ready to reject.” See Michael Paul Gallagher, S.J., Clashing Symbols (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 142. It is crucial to know that consolation and desolation do not equate with good and evil, no matter how closely they seem linked together. In general, people seem to be at ease with consolation while they do not like or know what to do with desolation. Sometimes, they even view desolation as harmful and bad. Ignatius is at pains to insist, however, that desolation, far from being necessarily harmful and bad, can in fact be an experience of growth if it is handled well. See Sp.Ex. #318–322.
this can, of course, be helpful) or even what exactly those feelings are (joy, anger, guilt, or confusion). It is rather, David Lonsdale insists, about “the direction in which these feelings are leading.”  

Finally, one makes a choice based on the results of both one’s reasoning and feelings. One then offers this choice to God and seeks His confirmation, which often comes in the form of a deep inner peace. This theological affirmation is so crucial that Ignatius himself has to insist: “When that election or decision has been made, the person who has made it ought with great diligence to go to prayer before God our Lord and to offer Him that election, that the Divine Majesty may be pleased to receive and confirm it, if it is conducive to his greater service and praise.”  

Once this confirmation is granted, one can live out that decision with courage, trust, hope, and love.

Of course, there are times that a certain path that God wants a person to follow is so clear that this person does not need to doubt. Jesus’ direct call to Paul on his way to Damascus is an example. There are also times that one experiences a period of tranquility, i.e., one’s soul is not being moved one way or the other by various spirits. In that case, Ignatius invites this person to use his or her natural faculties in freedom and peace. This person can ponder over the advantages and disadvantages. He or she can also consider a few situations such as: if he or she needs to give another person advice (given a similar circumstance), what will it be? If he or she dies tomorrow, what will he or she decide in regard to the issue that he or she is discerning? Finally, if this person stands in front of God at the final judgment, how does this situation affect his or her decision? This consideration may

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28 *Sp.Ex.* #183.
help the person to arrive at a choice. He or she then can offer it to God and seek His confirmation as in the other circumstance. The diagram below is a summary of this process.

![Diagram 1: Ignatian discernment](image)

All of what has been presented thus far reminds one of the fact that, although one often reaches a decision as a result of discernment, the focus is not on the final choice. The primary focus is that one should do everything within the framework of prayer and the living relationship with God, so that one can become what God ultimately wants one to be. It is about helping a person to follow God with an obedient heart and mind.

### 2. Ignatian obedience: theological ground and significances

In a letter sent to Andrés de Oviedo, a Jesuit rector at Gandía, Ignatius reminds the rector that in the practice of the Society of Jesus, obedience demands not only the submission of action, but also of judgment and will. He writes: “Obedience without submission of
judgment is marked by dissatisfaction, pain, reluctance, slackness, criticism, excuses, and other imperfections and obstacles of no small moment which deprive obedience of its value and merit.”

To Ignatius, good obedience can go as far as seeking to be blind. This blindness requires of the person a willingness to surrender his own understanding and do what is ordered. Even when this person perceives reasons not to do what is commanded, he must humbly present them to the superior and let the latter tell him what to do afterward. With this strong emphasis on obedience, it is no wonder that people often raise their eyebrows at the necessity and extremity of this practice. What exactly is obedience and how helpful is it? What is its theological ground and why is it important for the life of a Jesuit?

2.1. Jesuit obedience: an overview

In the Society of Jesus, vowing to obey the leaders of the Order is a non-negotiable requirement. Ignatius strongly emphasized this idea in the Constitutions because he wanted to be sure that men who wished to join this Order would not fail to understand that obedience must be unconditional in order for it to have any meaning or to be any use. He even insisted on a principle that those who live under obedience should let themselves “be carried and directed by Divine providence through the agency of the superior” as if they were “a lifeless body, which allows itself to be carried to any place and for any purpose in which the one

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30 Ignatius elaborates on this idea clearly in a letter sent to Giovanni Battista Viola, who was among the first Italians to enter the Society of Jesus: “Now inasmuch as it seems to me that obedience seeks to be blind, I understand blind in two ways: (1) An inferior ought to surrender his own understanding (where there is no question of sin) and do what is commanded him; and (2) an inferior who is or has been given a command by the superior and perceives reasons against what is commanded or drawbacks in it ought humbly to represent to the superior the reasons or drawbacks that occur to him, without attempting to draw him to one side or the other, and afterwards tranquilly to follow the way that is pointed out to him or commanded.” See John W. Padberg, S.J., “Letter to Giovanni Battista Viola” (letter #52 from Rome on August 1542), Ignatius of Loyola – Letters and Instructions, 87.
holding it in his hand wishes to employ.”31 To Ignatius, a man who obeys the commands of his superior only when they suit his convenience is not obedient. This man is merely intermittently co-operative, and such an attitude is not enough to be a Knight of Christ. This, of course, does not mean that, according to Ignatius, obedience must be absolute. For even Ignatius at times reflected carefully on a particular order and expressed his irritation towards the inquisitorial sentence preventing him from preaching. Yet, as Sabina Pavone observes, “His [Ignatius’] reaction was quite thoughtful and prudent, always on the side of maintaining unity in the Church and, at the same time, not compromising his desire to serve God through others.”32

To a certain extent, Ignatius wants his fellow Jesuits to accept the fullness of obedience, in which the whole person is involved, so that they are not only doing something obediently but are essentially obedient. The reason for Ignatius’ insistence in demanding this submission and involvement of the whole person lies in the fact that obedience is the key condition for perfect service toward God. De Guilbert asserts: “It [obedience] is an exercise of an abnegation, which is most complete, most difficult, and most costly, and abnegation whose roots go deepest into that self-love which is God’s rival in the soul.”33

Given this demanding and difficult requirement, John Futrell insists that the typical structure of Jesuit obedience must include the following points. First, it must be total, perfect, loving, and joyful. Second, it needs to be a means to the apostolic end of the Order. Third, the personal spiritual motivation of seeing Christ giving commands through the superior

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31 Society of Jesus, *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms*, ed. John W. Padberg, S.J., 222 (Const. [547]).
helps the Jesuits to love and reverence their superior, and thereby obey him perfectly. Fourth, perfect obedience is threefold: it involves promptness and joy in the execution of the command, and it is based on the conformity of the will and judgment to that of the superior. Fifth, blind obedience is necessary in order to obey promptly and joyfully. Sixth, in conforming themselves perfectly to the judgment of the superior in perfect obedience, Jesuits achieve greater conformity to the will of God according to the scope of their vocation. Finally, obedience is possible only if people have attained a true spirit of liberty, centering their desire not upon themselves but the service and praise of God.34

This structure helps one to understand that Jesuit obedience is essential not for its own sake but for the sake of the mission. It also helps one to realize that the practice of obedience in Jesuit governance is not supposed to be authoritarian and arbitrary but to be guided by acts of love. Indeed, within the Society of Jesus, a Jesuit superior is seen as a person who takes the place of Christ, not in the sense of being an absolute king, but as an interpreter of God’s will. This superior, out of genuine love for his brothers, will try his best to lead them on a journey to find and obey the will of God. Conversely, by obeying their superior, Jesuits co-operate with their leader to create a spiritual uniformity and cohesion within the order, so that the entire Society can focus wholeheartedly on God and their mission. Nonetheless, if this cooperation does not come out of their own will, it has no real power and enthusiasm. Hence, although Jesuit obedience seems to be very extreme, it always entails a dimension of freedom, which helps to transform passive obedience into an active one. This freedom assists the Jesuits not simply to let things happen but to actively grasp, pursue, and carry out God’s will, which is hidden in the will of the superior.

2.2.  Theological ground of obedience

The emphasis on obedience in the life of a person is a consequence of the abnegation so strongly stressed in the *Spiritual Exercises*. In one of his books, de Guilbert states:

Obedience presupposes orders, and therefore superiors. Our Father [St. Ignatius] taught that authority is, of course, necessary to help the neighbor and to do him good, and ought, therefore, to be sought after; that this authority, however, is not acquired by anything that recalls and smacks of the world, but by contempt of the world, and through true humility, and through showing more by deeds than by words that one is a disciple and an imitator of the humble Christ, and that one wishes for and seeks only His glory and the salvation of the souls whom He came to seek.\(^\text{35}\)

The above statement helps one to understand that the way Jesus loves and relates to His Father not only gives meaning to, but also becomes the theological ground for, one’s obedience. In a sense, it is not obedience but the love between the order-giver and the order-receiver that counts. This love is “the only authentic core of obedience” because it helps one to transform every obligation into a choice, to turn every external desire of the beloved to the interior desire of the lover, and to preserve obedience from being oppressive.\(^\text{36}\) To achieve such a love, one can learn from Jesus whose humanity comes into full existence only as He enacts the obedience of filial love to the end:

Each obedient act of Jesus carries Him deeper into the mystery of Himself. His self-surrender is no longer an interior stance but an active, external, interpersonal obedience, which brings Him into the midst of His people’s needs; and it is precisely through His obedience, though fatal, loving of them to the end that Jesus exists as the human being God created Him to be.\(^\text{37}\)

Jesus’ obedience to the Father, however, does not come after the incarnation but rather exists in eternity. The meditation on the “Incarnation” in the *Spiritual Exercises* invites people to contemplate the fact that from eternity the Son has already said yes to the will of


\(^{36}\) Mark McIntosh, S.J., *Christology from Within* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 77.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 82–83.
the Father to become a man in order to save the human race.\textsuperscript{38} This “yes” does not come from a coercive imposition of the Father’s will upon that of His Son. Rather, it comes from the humble and self-emptying love that the Son has for the Father. Such a love desires nothing but the will of the Father to be realized and His Name to be glorified. In return, the Father humbly receives His Son and offers Him to humans so that, with the assistance of this gift and the grace of the Holy Spirit, they will be saved and transformed.

Without a doubt, God always reveals Himself as humility. He makes the world and human beings not out of neediness but “from the overflow of His all-embracing and all-giving love,” and He is, as Gill Goulding puts it, “self-donating love—pure and simple.”\textsuperscript{39} He calls rational beings into existence and invites them to be conversation partners. He wants them to be like Himself through an act of imitating and learning from His Son, who eternally desires to self-give His life to the Father and the world. Thus, it will be accurate to say that humility and self-emptying are key characteristics that people must have if they want to enter into a relationship with God. In fact, when people empty themselves, they make room for God and room for themselves to receive and obey God, as well as those whom God chooses to be His representatives.

This humility and self-emptying do not aim at removing one’s dignity and freedom but creating space for God’s grace and love to enter. This grace and love enable a real relationship to form and allow a person to become “the fullest expression of personhood.”\textsuperscript{40} As people who are created in God’s image and given everything so as to achieve the end for which they are created, humans are invited to imitate the obedient relationship between Christ and the Father and to embrace it as the foundation of their own obedience.

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\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Sp.Ex.} #102. \\
\textsuperscript{39} Gill Goulding, \textit{Creative Perseverance} (Ottawa: Novalis, 2003), 119. \\
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 121.
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Such a foundation helps them to be attentive to the teaching of St. Paul in his letter to the Romans: “All authority is instituted by God” (Romans 13:1). Of course, this authority is given not for personal benefit but to help a person serve all others as Jesus did: “Although Jesus is given all power over heaven and earth, He is still willing to obey His Father to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8). From Jesus’ example, one realizes that authority and obedience do not antagonize each other. Nor are authority and obedience in opposition to each other, such that they always cancel each other out. They are not relentless rivals because they both come from the same source of love, i.e., God. Those who practice authority and obedience share the same spirit of being sent freely to serve God and others selflessly as Jesus did. Because of this, the superior and the subjects should focus not on their own selfish desires, but God and His mission.

Given the fact that obedience has its roots in a loving relationship between Jesus and His Father, and that all authority is instituted by God, people will practice this virtue not for its own sake but for the sake of a desire to imitate Jesus Christ. The Society of Jesus always upholds this virtue and uses it as a significant tool assisting its governance within the Order.

2.3. **Obedience in the Society of Jesus and its significance**

Driven by a desire to develop a close relationship with Christ, Ignatius invites his followers to be open to see Jesus’ presence in all authorities. In a letter sent to the Jesuits in Portugal, he advises:

I would like all of you to practice recognizing Christ our Lord in any superior, reverencing and obeying His Divine Majesty in him with all devotion. This will appear less strange to you if you recall how in writing to the Ephesians Saint Paul enjoins obeying even temporal and pagan superiors as Christ, from whom all well-ordered authority derives: “Be obedient to your master according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the simplicity of your heart, as to Christ; not serving to the eye,
as if pleasing men, but as servants of Christ doing the will of God, rendering service from the heart and with a good will, as to the Lord and not to men” (Eph. 6:5–7).

The implied message in this letter is that Ignatian obedience is not about the superior or the subject. Rather, it is about Christ and one’s desire to love Him more closely through the act of obeying those whom He chooses to be leaders. In doing so, one has a better understanding of one’s commitment to search for and carry out the will of God. Moreover, by the very act of obeying a leader, one imitates Christ who always humbly embraces and obeys the will of the Father. This act will help one to become a true person because, as Aristotle Papanikolaou insists, “human personhood is constituted through an imitation of the way Jesus relates to His Father in the form of obedience.” Thus, the first significance of obedience is that it helps people to search for and carry out the will of God so as to be truly human.

Another significance of obedience is the recognition of the presence of God and His will in a leader. When people submit themselves to a superior, they do not do it for the sake of the latter, but rather they obey him because they believe that he will point them in the right direction and help them to make a community of love for the service of Christ through the aid of souls in companionship. Likewise, they believe that this leader performs his duty not for himself, but for the mission of God who entrusts it to him and to the entire community. Hence, they are willing to do anything that the latter asks or even desires.

The third significance of obedience is that obedience opens a way to the future and frees people in such a way that they can act more fully and powerfully. For example, in 1539,

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43 Of course, this can only happen when a leader performs his authority according to God’s invitation: to love and relate to the subjects the way God does. For, according to Gill Goulding, “authority is a relational reality. It involves a series of expectations, the conferral of certain power and the giving of service. The currency of authority is competence and trustworthiness. A difficulty can, therefore, arise when incompetence and lack of trust are made manifest.” See Gill Goulding, *Creative Perseverance*, 28.
the first ten Jesuits gathered and discerned the question whether they should take the Third Vow, which they phrased as “whether we should obey one person among ourselves.” This phrase, Joseph Conwell insists, is extremely important because “it implied a realization that the person, to whom they would eventually submit, was not an arrogant figure or a heroic statue but an ordinary person.”44 This person would walk with his community members not as a companion in power, but a companion in love. This realization truly frees them and assists everyone, including the leader, to focus solely on God’s mission.

Finally, authentic obedience plays a crucial role in maintaining the unity of the community. In fact, when he was still alive, Ignatius insisted on obedience and union with God and with one another as safeguards against disunity. To him, those who are united with God and with the community will have the humility to recognize that “their judgments are at best indicative, not definitive, and will not engage in decisive discussions in the community when superiors or majority decide an issue in a way contrary to their best judgment.”45 They then acquire the habit of proposing their idea and letting God, through their superiors, dispose of it.

Certainly, obedience is a crucial factor in the life of a Jesuit. It is so important that Ignatius has to insist in one of the “Rules for thinking with the Church”: “To keep ourselves right in all things, we ought to hold fast to this principle: What seems to me to be white, I will believe to be black if the hierarchical Church thus determines it.”46 With such a strong

46 Sp.Ex. #365 (rule no. 13). On the surface, it appears absurd for someone to believe in a statement defined by the hierarchical church while experiencing it differently. Yet one must not read this principle so literally. This rule is more an indication of a disposition of soul than a practical instrument for theological discourse. It is, as Gill Goulding points out, “an appeal to an interior disposition that is able to recognize that our holy Mother Church is the source of life” and, accordingly, “our attitude toward it is that of faith which
emphasizes obedience, there seems to be no place for discernment in Ignatian spirituality. It may be easier for one then to just obey and forget all about discernment. Is this suggestion sound? Will the importance of obedience cancel the need for discernment? What is the relationship between discernment and obedience and how do these two elements challenge and/or support each other?

3. **Relationship between Ignatian discernment and obedience**

The essence of being a Christian is to listen to every call directed to oneself and to let it touch and guide one. No one can do this on behalf of another. Even with great knowledge of God, and regardless of how helpful it may be, such intelligence cannot replace a personally attentive and obedient ear. Consequently, it would be a mistake to hold the view that obedience is so significant that it can cancel the need for discernment. Ignatius stressed the importance of obedience because he believed that it is God’s will and that it will help people to maintain unity within the Church. Yet, as David Lonsdale points out:

> When the decision of Church authorities in significant matters clashed with his own convictions, and especially with the outcome of his personal discernment, he [Ignatius] obeyed, but not without protest. He used all possible forms of representation to make his position known, respectfully but firmly, and the ground on which he stood. He even used whatever legitimate means he had to influence the authorities and have the decision changed, when he truly felt that was desirable.\(^47\)

The example above indicates that discernment and obedience are both essential.

People must not embrace one at the expense of the other. Discernment and obedience are like two wings of the same bird, without either of which the bird cannot fly. When the relationship between these two elements is healthy, people can focus on God rather than enables us to see beyond the immediate with a heart-centered sensitivity to what is true and light.” See Gill Goulding, *A Church of Passion and Hope* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 43.

\(^{47}\) David Lonsdale, S.J., *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear*, 184. Ignatius’ early reaction to the Dominican fathers and the inquisitors is an example. Note that although Ignatius used whatever legitimate means he had to propose his desire to the authorities, he never encouraged his brothers to protest in a sense of rebelling and destroying the harmony and unity of the Church.
themselves. They can understand the meaning of authority and know how to balance these two factors so as to work the way God wants them.

3.1. Discernment and obedience help one to focus on God

The main focus of the Society of Jesus is God, His will and glory. All of its activities serve this purpose. When a Jesuit enters into a discernment process, he neither seeks the fulfillment of his personal agenda nor that of his superior. Rather, he and his superior together discern what God wants them to do. The will of God and the predominance of the apostolic good must be their main emphases. As Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, the former Superior General of the Society of Jesus, asserts:

The superior and the subject together seek that which the Lord truly wills. Hence, it is not some individualistic things. It is not the choice of my future. It is dialogue, but not in the sense that a compromise is sought between the position of the Superior and those of his Jesuit brother. It is best put as obedience to the Lord through the Superior, who is trying not to let his own ideas prevail, but the apostolic good.  

If both superior and subjects place God at the center of their discernment, they will react in a way that is worthy of praise. They will bring the matter to prayer to search not for a revelation of the content of a decision but “the light necessary to achieve spiritual liberty so that they can direct their lives towards the praise and service of God.” The superior then knows how to give a command without imposing his will on the subject, and the latter how to obey it with trust, love, and joy.

Ignatius set a good example. In his discernment regarding whether Francis Borgia should be made a cardinal, Ignatius did not reflect on what he wanted Borgia to do. Nor was he concerned about what kind of order he would give Borgia at the end of the process.

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49 John Futrell, S.J., Making an Apostolic Community of Love: The Role of the Superior according to St. Ignatius of Loyola, 127.
Rather, he prayed that God would show him how He wanted him to advise Borgia and whether Borgia’s being made a cardinal would best serve and glorify God. In the end, he opposed the idea because he believed that the opposition was what God preferred. He did not, however, force Borgia to accept his decision. He only shared with Borgia the conclusion of his discernment and invited Borgia to discern the will of God for himself.50

Implied in the way Ignatius dealt with Borgia’s case was a spirit of love and trust in God and one another. This spirit unfolded in the form of respect and dialogue. In fact, though according to Ignatius, a superior is an interpreter of God’s will, he never held the view that the superior’s interpretation was infallible. Nor did he suggest that people should take his view so literally that they would surrender their responsibility before God for their own judgment of conscience.51 Rather, Ignatius encouraged people to pray and share the fruit of their prayer in dialogue so as to understand the will of God for themselves. He believed that the Spirit of God communicates through everybody and that God will reveal Himself in the desires and suggestions of each party involved in the discernment. Given the Spirit that inspires both parties and the assistance of God’s grace, the superior can transform that inspiration into an order, and the subject can transform it into holy obedience.

3.2. Discernment and obedience help one to understand the meaning of authority

In reality, many leaders equate authority with power and discipline. They tend to enforce the rules without much attention to personal dignity and individual participation.


51 In the Constitutions, Ignatius suggests that “all members of the Society of Jesus must conform their will and judgment wholly to the will and judgment of the superior, in all things where no species of sin can be judged to be present.” See *Constr.* [547]. Indeed, even those who have lawful authority do not have the authority to command immoral acts. This fact indicates that Ignatius would not ask people to obey blindly to the extent that they would commit sins against God or against their conscience.
They forget that power and discipline alone can kill the spirit, and that, although they may have the best intentions, their actions can be “vapid and perhaps positively destructive,” if they let their passions run unchecked.\textsuperscript{52} Some leaders even believe that in exercising their power they help the others to follow God’s will and demands. Without a doubt, following God’s will is very important. But as Monika Hellwig points out, “complication sets in as soon as people begin to ask how they are to know the will and command of God.”\textsuperscript{53}

Indeed, how is one to know the will and command of God so as to obey it? One is to know the will and command of God by entering into a discernment process. One can also know it through the advice of one’s superior, for as St. Paul mentions in his letter to the Ephesians, a leader is divinely appointed by God. Thus, he or she is to a certain extent God’s representative. An over-emphasis on the role of authority, however, may lead people to the point of not paying much attention to the voice of the Holy Spirit, who wants to communicate directly with them. It may also lead people not to see the difference between a representative of God and God Himself. This is a trap that both superiors and subordinates fall into from time to time.

Undeniably, if a superior listens well to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he can lead others in the right direction. Through genuine discernment, this leader will remember that authority instituted by God and given to him is authority to serve rather than to be served, to listen rather than to impose, to respect the dignity of others rather than to despise it, and to invite others to participate rather than to do and decide everything on their behalf.

\textsuperscript{52} Michael Barnes, S.J., \textit{“The Spiritual Exercises: A Zen Perspective,”} \textit{The Way Supplement} 55 (Spring 1986), 89.

Although Ignatius recognizes the value of blind obedience, he does not advise his Jesuit brothers to place such a heavy emphasis on blind obedience to authority that they cannot see certain important distinctions between God’s absolute will and human will. He wants them to be responsible adults rather than naïve children. Naïve children cannot see the difference between a legitimate and an illegitimate voice. All they know is to say yes. Responsible adults, in contrast, will listen and obey, yet always reflect on the authenticity and legitimacy of a command. They will let their obedience challenge their discernment, such that they will not be entangled by their own desires. Likewise, they will let their discernment challenge their obedience so that they will not become perpetually immature people who nod their heads while knowing nothing.

Ignatius also promotes a total submission not only of action but also of judgment and will. But this submission has value only after one has already discerned and dialogued with one’s superior. Thus, one should not view dialoguing, questioning, and suggesting as signs of disobedience, but rather as helpful tools assisting one to discern well so as to practice one’s obedience even better. In fact, through such genuine dialogues, one understands that authority does not mean enforcing an ideology. Nor does it mean something that is available to help a particular person achieve his or her agenda. Its purpose is not to undermine personal autonomy, but rather to foster it. One can foster this personal autonomy by becoming the person that God wants one to be: a servant of servants, an instrument to help other people draw closer to God, and a catalyst for stirring up in their hearts the fire of love, trust, and responsibility. Without this aspect, authority will be nothing but tyrannous power and obedience a competition of rights: mine vs. yours.
3.3. Discernment and obedience help one to be balanced

According to their various abilities, people often enter into a discernment process in the hope of seeking God’s will. They know that, given the limitations of human nature, the outcome of their discernment is not necessarily infallible, and thus they need external help so as to avoid potentially fatal mistakes. At this point obedience can offer assistance. People also understand that not all orders are fruits of discernment, especially when those commands come from an abusive authority. Dean Brackley reminds the reader that “there is nothing that is easier to abuse than authority.” Such a phenomenon, however, should not blind people to its importance. The tendency to abuse one’s authority can be avoided by letting one’s authentic discernment shed light on the exercise of power. At this point discernment can turn a burden into a blessing, and an abusive order into an act of love. In fact, with the assistance of sincere discernment, people can focus not on themselves but God and the common good. They then can enjoy the peace that God wants them to enjoy.

According to the Ignatian tradition, peace is found in the will of God. Since the purpose of authentic obedience is to follow this will, it often brings peace and joy to those who have an obedient ear. Nonetheless, there needs to be a dialectical balance between obedience and discernment. There also needs to be a mutual confidence between leaders and followers. Leaders, as George Earle points out, must be convinced that “the followers have a contribution to make and that they can make it.” The followers, in turn, must believe that “their leaders have not usurped power, which properly belongs to them, but rather, they are working alongside them in a common cause.” Both parties should try to reach a balance in which they place God at the center. They should take everything into consideration and not

let discernment cancel obedience or let the latter hinder the former. For without obedience, discernment is an abstract concept. Conversely, without discernment, obedience may turn a person into a perpetually naïve child. These two factors, if kept in balance, will support and enhance each other; and together they will help people embrace moderate positions rather than extreme ones. William Barry presents a good summary of the relationship between these two elements and how they help people to be balanced:

Ignatius realized that he could not foresee all the circumstances that might necessitate adjustments in how one acted. Jesuits are expected to use their discretion in applying the law, and to be discerning even in matters that are legislated by the Constitutions or mandated by superiors. Jesuit obedience requires that Jesuits be men of prayer and abnegation, men who are sincerely seeking God’s will in all that they do. It also requires that they be men who have learned to discern the chaff from the wheat in their own experience through steady use of the twice-daily examination of conscience and applications for the rules of discernment of spirits. They are not expected to be automatons who have no mind and will of their own; rather they are to be men who believe in practice that God communicates directly with them, as with superiors and everyone else. They are also to be men who are humble enough to recognize their own fallibility and, as a result, who do not become so enamored of their own discernment that they cannot abide any contradiction. 56

Certainly, people will benefit when they know how to let their discernment shed light on their practice of obedience, and how to use the latter to check their discernment so it will neither be an abstract concept nor a self-indulgent illusion. If this is the case, then is there anything that may hinder their ability to discern and obey? What would those obstacles be?

4. Obstacles that may hinder the process of discernment and obedience

When one reflects on the questions above, one can identify many factors that may hinder the process of discernment and obedience. The first obstacle is an inability to recognize God’s action beyond human limitation. Many times people question St. Paul’s concept of authority as that which is instituted by God (Romans 13:1). If St. Paul’s

suggestion is true, they wonder, then how could God choose a person so clueless and incompetent as the authority with whom they are dealing? They forget that, even if there are times at which God permits unworthy men and women to be appointed to office, this does not mean that He contradicts Himself. God alone, as Thomas Dubay insists, is “the assurance that these so-called clueless and incompetent men and women will not ultimately destroy or harm the others.”

Nevertheless, because there are still many unworthy people who happen to be leaders in reality, people who do not explicitly question God’s assurance may unconsciously set God and His assurance aside. They then fall into the trap of fear. They fear that the judgment of others will be totally different. They are afraid of the risk to their own security if they enter into dialogue with their companions. They are afraid of making mistakes. They also fear their own limitations, which lead them “to put the blame upon the bad will and immaturity of others rather than on the shortcoming of human nature in general.” Finally, they are afraid of being honest about evidently bad situations due to circumstances beyond their control. All of these things will prevent them from entering into authentic discernment and from receiving an order with peace and joy.

Another hindrance is that people do not pay attention to the close connection between authenticity, reality, and theory. Sometimes they treat these elements as if they are different realms. Other times, they propose a theory that may be completely irrelevant to real life. A theory that stresses the importance of absolute obedience without respecting dignity and

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The history of the human race bears out the correctness of this observation. Many times God’s abundant grace has fully covered negative situations and transformed them into somethings positive. Stories about God working patiently with sinful leaders and transforming them into saints by the power of His grace appear quite often in the Scriptures. King David’s story is an example.

conscience or leaving any room for discernment and dialogue can be seen as an example of such an irrelevant theory. In fact, when people separate authenticity, theory and reality, they fail to see the difference between “how to” and “for whom” and “for what purpose.” Most often, they focus solely on the “how to,” and as a result, they lose their touch with reality and only stop short at the theoretical realm. Their practice of discernment and obedience then will be negatively affected.

The third obstacle is that people do not truly desire God to take the lead. When this happens, people leave the door wide open for problems. They may grieve or quench the Spirit, encourage authoritarianism, or practice an extreme strictness that does much deciding but little listening. It is so because “people often think they are listening to the Spirit when He is not speaking at all—or at least He is not saying what they think He is saying.” 59 Of course, they may not hold God responsible for what He did not say. Yet a problem remains. Even when God does speak, as Thomas Dubay asserts, “the recipients may either not hear or distort what they did hear or conclude invalidly from it. Moreover, they have a tendency to live in the mind of others. Their minds are impregnated with other value systems that exclude one another.” 60 There seems to be no room for the mind of God, and thus they cannot detect the motion of the Spirit. They then trust themselves more than anybody else. This sole self-trust may lead them to embrace an authoritarian style: turning people into things, demanding absolute obedience in all circumstances, performing their duty out of fear, invalidating the fruit of the discernment of others, not trusting anyone, perpetually viewing others as childish or unimportant, refusing to listen to others, insisting that they are always right, and not

60 Ibid., 131.
having good relationships with anyone, including God.\(^{61}\) It will be hard for them then to discern or obey authentically.

The next obstacle is to focus too much on personal freedom without seeing the needs of the entire community. The obvious cases are those where someone listens only to what he wants to hear and rejects all other voices, even if they come from a divine source. In most subtle cases a person may think, “I have the freedom to make my own discernment and decision, and those whose decisions are different from mine violate my autonomy.” The fruit of discernment and obedience gathered from this mentality then will be disappointing.

The fifth hindrance is a lack of humility and an over-emphasis on power. When people lack humility, they can accept neither their own limitations nor the fact that the conclusion of their discernment is very different from that of the other. Nor can they entertain the idea that the conclusion of the other’s discernment is better and is closer to God’s desire than theirs. Such an inability to accept limitation is very dangerous. As Jules Toner cautions, it may lead people to “misunderstanding the divine counsel or mistakenly taking a counsel of the devil and thinking that it is a counsel of the Holy Spirit.”\(^{62}\) This lack of humility can also provoke in them a thirst for power and prestige, which in turn will negatively influence the way they treat other people: commanding greater respect, making decisions unilaterally, and gathering and controlling more resources. It also stirs in them a desire to be the greatest, and hence the Gospel’s instruction to be a servant of servants will forever be remote and abstract advice.\(^{63}\) Given the shortcomings of their nature, people often fall into the habit of abusing

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\(^{63}\) According to Fran Ferder, power itself is not a problem because it has many faces. It can free or enslave, uplift or oppress, promote peace or generate conflict. In fact, it is important for us to remember that Jesus does not oppose power, but its abuse. See Fran Ferder, Words Made Flesh (Indiana, Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2000), 143.
their power when they embrace it undiscerningly. Once this happens, they can neither discern well nor obey the way Jesus obeys His Father.

The sixth obstacle is to rely too much on either oneself or one’s superior without knowing how to balance these two. When people rely too much on themselves, they fall into the risk of refusing God’s leadership, as we saw in the third hindrance. When they depend too much on their superior, they may seek the latter’s confirmation rather than God’s. If this happens, the authenticity of discernment and obedience will be at stake because “no one except God can confirm or disconfirm a subject’s decision about His will, which has been reached by a sound discernment.”

The last hindrance is the tension between personal freedom and authority. More accurately, it is the inability to deal with this tension. People may forget the fact that tension is always inevitable. If one is not comfortable with tension, one can attempt to eliminate it by coming down heavily on one side and turning a blind eye to the other side. One may choose to be either very controlling and authoritarian or very indifferent (in a negative sense, i.e., having a hands-off attitude). One can be very critical without knowing the difference between “a criticism inspired by faith and love” and “a systematically negative, aggressive, and polemical criticism.” When this phenomenon occurs, discernment and obedience do not mean much to them.

All of these issues can become major stumbling blocks preventing people from entering into an authentic discernment and from practicing obedience with grace. Ironically, the tools to remove such hindrances are discernment and obedience themselves. This thesis is not so much about how to deal with these problems. Nonetheless, the subsequent chapters

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may shed some light on these issues and thereby assist one in dialoguing with the Vietnamese way of discerning and obeying.
Chapter Four

Discernment and Obedience in Vietnamese Culture

In a manner very different from China, its neighboring country, the traditional Vietnamese worldview is expressed not in philosophical works but primarily in folk songs, proverbs, and poems. This phenomenon occurs because this manner of expression reflects a reality that is rooted in daily experience; and all Vietnamese people, learned and unlearned alike, can relate, understand, and participate. When such an expression is used often enough, it strengthens the people’s tendency to focus more on a tradition that the community has practiced intuitively over the years, rather than on arriving at a logical method. Consequently, if one asks the Vietnamese how they discern and the reason underlying their obedience, one will hear vague explanations that are filled with subjective experiences, intuitions, feelings, analogies, and symbols. A logical answer and a concrete method appear to be absent in their responses. Thus, the task of comparing the Vietnamese notion of discernment and obedience with the Ignatian one will be a difficult task.

To make this task easier, this chapter will systematize the Vietnamese ways of discerning and obeying and will discuss their advantages and disadvantages. The latter part of the chapter will identify tensions between the Ignatian and Vietnamese methods and explain why obedience can be an obstacle to the process of discernment, if the Vietnamese attempt to discern according to the Ignatian method. Finally, the chapter will ponder the possibility of having an authentic Ignatian discernment in a true Vietnamese setting.

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1 “Mưu sự tài nhân, thành sự tài Thiên” (man proposes, God disposes), “Biết mình biết người, trăm tran trăm thằng” (to know oneself is true progress), “Đừng vị người dỗ mà bỏ lỡ hay” (a fool may sometimes give wise counsel), “Khôn để không bừng ngọc dân” (there is safety in numbers), and “Nhập gia tùy tục, đạo giang tùy khúc” (when in Rome, do as the Romans) are examples of these folk sayings and proverbs.
1. The notion of discernment and obedience in Vietnamese culture

1.1. Vietnamese discernment and obedience: An overview

People often translate the words “discern” and “obey” into Vietnamese as “biến phân” and “vâng phục.” To a certain extent, these terms can be seen as adequate Vietnamese translations. Nonetheless, there are many differences between the Ignatian and Vietnamese notions of discernment and obedience. If Ignatian discernment places Christ at the center of the whole process, then biến phân focuses on maintaining a harmonious environment. Those who practice biến phân do not ask questions such as “What have I done for Christ?” “What am I going to do for Christ?” “What ought I to do for Christ?”, or “Which options will please God most?” as they do in Ignatian discernment. Rather, they wonder whether the available options are compatible with each other and whether these options enhance the communal peacefulness. Thus, the final choice may not be an either-or but a both-and.

“Biên” means to be aware, to reason, to invoke, to prepare, or to defend. “Phân” means to divide, to share, to distinguish, or to analyze. Biên phân is a process in which people go through a procedure that involves four actions: first, being aware of what they internally or externally experience; second, reflecting carefully on and analyzing those

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2 A focus on maintaining a harmonious relationship does not mean that one should ignore the presence of God or reject the influence of His grace in the process. Nor does it mean that the topic of biến phân is purely material. For even in spiritual matters, the Vietnamese often long for a well-balanced accord between Heaven, Earth, and Humanity. Moreover, Vietnamese culture is strongly influenced by Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, all of which tend to embrace the “via negativa” more than the “via positiva.” In fact, in the first two sentences of his Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu insists that the path that can be known is not a true path, and a name that can be identified is not a true name. Based on this conviction, he and many other sages refuse to talk much about God or use Him as the subject of their discernment. Like them, the Vietnamese do not place God at the center of their biến phân. This should not be treated as proof that they do not believe in God, His actions, or providence in the universe. On the contrary, these people see God and His spirit in everything, to the point that they are, sometimes, seen as pantheists. This acknowledgment appears in many Vietnamese proverbs: “Trời sinh voi, Trời sinh cỏ” (if God creates the elephant, He will create grass for its nutrition), “Mọi sự bởi Trời mà có” (everything comes from God), and “Cha mẹ sinh con, Trời sinh tính” (the mother gives birth to a child, but God gives it a nature) are some examples. See Ký Trương, Thiên Chúa Giáo và Tam Giáo (Christianity and the Triple Religions) (Santa Ana: Tủ Sách Đào Tông Giáo, 2000), 405–409.

3 Sp.Ex. #53.
experiences; third, placing them against the norms and experiences of the whole community and justifying or defending compatible values; and fourth, making a choice that further nurtures the communal harmony.⁴

“Vâng” means to echo, to submit, to acknowledge, or to obey. “Phúc” means to respect, to serve, to restore, or to listen to reason of both mind and heart. Vâng phúc is a responsible act that reflects a deep respect for authority and a desire to listen to the reasons of both mind and heart so as to restore a right relationship and maintain a peaceful setting for the whole society.⁵

As mentioned in the third chapter, the Ignatian notion of obedience is rooted in Jesus’ loving relationship with the Father, a love that leads Him to seek nothing but the Father’s will. Driven by a desire to imitate that love, people are invited to obey not only the will of God but also the will of those whose authority is instituted by God. The Vietnamese notion of vâng phúc, on the contrary, simply builds its foundation on harmony. Should one see a comparison between these two notions as an unequal comparison? How can one compare a notion that orients itself toward transcendental values with another notion that orients itself only toward worldly affairs? It may appear difficult on the surface. Nevertheless, the concept of harmony in Asia is not limited to worldly issues. Rather, “its spirituality has arisen from Asia’s religious plurality and is amenable to the Christian notion of all things being reconciled in Christ by the Holy Spirit.”⁶ The bishops of the Federation of Asian Bishops’

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⁴ Hôι Khái Trí Tiến Đức, Việt Nam Tự Điển (Vietnamese Dictionary) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Mới, 1954), 47.
⁵ Ibid., 629. Also see Phê Hoàng, Tự Điển Tiếng Việt (Vietnamese Dictionary) (Hà Nội: NXB Tự Điển Bách Khoa, 2010).
⁶ Peter Phan, In Our Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation (Maryknoll: New York, Orbis Books, 2003), 144.
Conference (FABC) explicate the concept of harmony theologically and remind the people that this spirituality will shape human life as an unfolding of right relationships:

Starting from a consciousness of God-given harmony within oneself, one moves into a harmonious relationship with one’s fellow humans; then one spreads out to be in harmony with nature and the wider universe. This unfolding and realization of right relationship within oneself, with the neighbors and the cosmos, leads to the summit experience of harmony with God.\(^7\)

The idea that one receives the gift of harmony from God and applies it to all aspects of one’s life (including one’s relationship with the cosmos and other people) is very similar to ideas in Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Vietnamese indigenous spirituality. These traditions, in turn, influence the ways people think, act, and live. Biên phân and vâng phúc are also influenced by these ideas. It would be ambitious to attempt to accurately identify all aspects of Vietnamese cultural values in the process of biên phân and vâng phúc. Nonetheless, one can at least study how these values function as the bases for Vietnamese discernment and obedience.\(^8\)

### 1.2. The bases of Vietnamese biên phân and vâng phúc

#### 1.2.1. Harmony: The first basis of Vietnamese biên phân and vâng phúc

In Vietnam, harmony is neither an intellectual consensus nor an absence of strife or a pragmatic strategy for successful living amid differences. Rather, Peter Phan points out, “it is a way of life that lies in the acceptance of diversity and richness.”\(^9\) This harmonious

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\(^8\) I have already discussed the historical and cultural influences on the way the Vietnamese people think, act and believe (see Chapter 2, pp. 59–65). In this section, however, I will extend the scope of that discussion to explain how the Vietnamese discern and obey.

\(^9\) Peter Phan, *In Our Tongues*, 143.

Peter Phan elaborates the concept of harmony as follows: “In terms of metaphysics, a harmonious relation between heaven and humans refers to harmony between spirit and material, between form and matter, between mind and body, and between the one (the universal) and the many (the particular). In a religious sense, it indicates a continual process between this life and the life hereafter, between the divine and the secular, and
emphasis arose from the agricultural philosophy and was enhanced by the teachings of many religious traditions such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism.

According to the Buddhist tradition, when one clings to the *anica* (impermanent things) and confuses them with immutable things, one lives in a state of disharmony with oneself, others and the cosmos, and thus one suffers. To be liberated from suffering, one has to restore the internal accord so that one can see the difference between the ultimate and the impermanent. Such an internal harmony is achieved when one understands the Four Noble Truths and follows the Eightfold Path.  

Buddhism also warns people about the three forms of poison that are *tham* (greed), *sân* (hatred), and *si* (ignorance). It is this poison that brings them suffering, prevents them from discerning rightly, and leads them to obey or disobey for the wrong reason.  

One way to avoid all these is to attach oneself to neither what is pleasant nor what is unpleasant and to go to the root of the problem by cutting down the forest of desires. The Eightfold Path will help one to do just that.

The Taoist tradition, on the other hand, sees things through the five cosmic elements (i.e., *mu* or wood, *huo* or fire, *tu* or earth, *jin* or metal, and *shui* or water) and the two poles

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yin and yang, striving for harmony between all things by means of detachment, meditation, and non-contrivance. Lao Tzu asserts that when harmony and balance cease to exist, people will lose their way. He also reminds his followers that the greatest virtue is to be one with the Tao, not by doing but by being, not by striving but by thriving (wu-wei or 无为). The concept of wu-wei (non-action) in Taoism does not equate to being passive to the point of doing absolutely nothing. Rather, it equates to working according to the Way of the Tao.

This Way of the Tao is the basis upon which human discernment can rely. It gives meaning to human obedience. By following it, Heaven and Earth will become united, and Humanity can obey without the need of laws, because everyone, leaders and subjects alike, will live in harmony with nature. There will be no need to use force, because as Lao Tzu insists, “When a country is ruled justly with a light hand, people are simple and good. When a country is ruled with force and a heavy hand, people become cunning and discontented.” Accordingly, Lao Tzu suggests that people should pay attention to nature, learn, and follow it. In doing so, they live their lives authentically without fear or concern. Everything else, including the practice of obedience, will follow because they have discerned and found the point of harmony and balance.

Confucianism, in turn, offers the notion of right relationships. According to this tradition, human beings are always entwined in a web of relationships in which their own position defines responsibilities and obligations. These relationships include the relationship

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13 The concept of harmony was present in Vietnam even before the arrival of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. It penetrated into their daily activities and language. Some compound words such as trời-dất (heaven and earth), chồng-vợ (husband and wife), ngày-dêm (day and night), sáng-tối (light and darkness), nam-nữ (male and female), cha-mẹ (father and mother), trên-dưới (above and below), or sống-chết (life and death) reflect this concept.
15 Ibid., 101 and 143.
16 Ibid., 129.
between leader and subjects, husband and wife, parents and children, older and younger siblings, and among friends. Each participant must observe his or her roles in these five relationships so as to produce the right speeches, right behaviors, and right actions.\textsuperscript{17} He or she can produce such things by practicing \textit{trí tri} (致知 arriving at understanding and thereby seeing why he or she needs to obey) and \textit{cách vât} (格物 examining all material things to discern what needs to be done).\textsuperscript{18}

Confucianism also encourages people to focus on cultivating themselves so as to become the \textit{noble people} (君子 bắc quán tử). They can do this by trying to achieve the \textit{chung yung} (中庸). \textit{Chung} means to bend neither one way nor the other, and \textit{yung} indicates that something is unchanging. \textit{Chung yung} means to maintain harmony and preserve the mind in a state of constant equilibrium. Everything in this state will be kept in due proportion, and consequently be expressed in the right degree. Such a “right expression” will lead the society to harmony, peace, and order.\textsuperscript{19} Furthermore, when a leader reaches the state of \textit{chung yung}, he will practice the virtue of \textit{jen} (善心 benevolence), which helps him to realize that his main task is to promote morality, not to establish legislation. This leader then will neither desire to have things done quickly nor look at small advantages. He will be very patient in everything he does. He will use his virtues to win people’s hearts, minds, and respect rather than use his power to repress them. Only when he is able to do these things can he become a \textit{wang dao}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{17} Walter H. Slote, George A. DeVos \textit{et al.}, \textit{Confucianism and the Family} (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), 133.
\end{thebibliography}
(benevolent king).\textsuperscript{20} It is important to note that the purpose of trying to become a \textit{wang dao} is not for the king’s own benefit but for the sake of the communal harmony, from which everything (including loving obedience) evolves.

1.2.2. Great respect for the hierarchy (especially parents and elders): The second basis of Vietnamese \textit{biện phân} and \textit{vâng phúc}

Influenced by Confucianism, the Vietnamese appreciate the logic of emphasizing the importance of roles, obligations, and hierarchy in their everyday activities. Yet their indigenous tradition leads them to modify this view by adding emotional elements such as admiration, affection, and feeling. In doing so, they hope to achieve a balanced position.\textsuperscript{21} Such a position demands a consciousness of belonging to an ancestral line and a community with lifelong obligations. It also requires an openness to developing respect for a superior within a hierarchy not solely because of a thirst for the common good, but because of the affection and love that people have for one another. Thus, when the Vietnamese try to \textit{biện phân}, there may still be a sense of reverence for authority that hides under a form of \textit{fear} and \textit{duty} due to the influence of Confucianism. These people, however, often ponder whether they can establish a relationship with the other out of respect.

The word \textit{respect} in Vietnamese is \textit{phúc}. It is this \textit{phúc} that keeps discernment in check and gives meaning to obedience. Indeed, in Vietnam, saying “yes” alone is not enough. The practice of obedience is complete only when such a “yes” is accompanied by a sense of

\textsuperscript{20} Confucianism highly values the importance of hierarchical order in the society. Nonetheless, it does not promote an attitude of abusing one’s power. According to Mencius, although it is God’s will that a person becomes a king, God also requires this person to restrain himself from abusing his authority. For without people, there will be no nation, and without the nation, there will be no king. There is a close relationship between the individual, the community, and authority. If a king is a tyrant (bá dao), people have the right to dethrone him. See Kim T. Trần, \textit{Nho Giáo (Confucianism)} (Hà Nội: NXB Văn Hóa, 2003), 203–204.

\textsuperscript{21} Having said so, it does not mean that the Vietnamese will let go of hierarchy easily. On the contrary, no one dares to break the established hierarchy. Such an act would be the most serious and unforgivable offense, no matter what the reason or how right that person may be. See Bích Phạm, \textit{The Vietnamese Family in Change: The Case of Red River Delta} (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999), 238ff.
respect and love. The Vietnamese often say “Vâng mà không phục,” meaning to obey without respect. When this happens, obedience becomes a reluctant act, and thus it is only an external rather than an internal obedience. This is why obedience becomes a compound word when it is translated into Vietnamese: vâng phục (saying yes with respect and love). Should one obey an order? A positive answer to this question depends on many factors, varying from whether such an obedience can be complete (i.e., having both vâng and phục), to whether it brings harmony to the community, and whether it serves the needs of not only one person but the whole group.  

1.2.3. Communal focus: The third basis of Vietnamese biến phận and vâng phục

Predisposed by a sense of duty, interdependence, and harmony (which comes from historical necessity as well as from the influences of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and indigenous traditions), the Vietnamese see their personal identity as something defined by group memberships. In fact, the Vietnamese word for “human” is “con người.” Con means the “self,” and người means “others.” One can only be a true human when one is in a relationship with others. Because of this, the Vietnamese often recognize a sense of pluralism in the phrase “I am,” even though it is not a combination of “I” with “others.” It is pluralistic because it is relational. Peter Phan asserts: “Contrary to Descartes’ I think, therefore I am, the Vietnamese would say, we are, therefore I am.” Such a viewpoint leads the Vietnamese to suppress their personal desires and aspirations if those go counter to the communal standards.

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22 Note that the word vâng phục is also a requirement for those who are in authority. If a leader does not discern or bring harmony, communal needs, and love into consideration, he or she will most likely fall short in giving out orders that only reflect his or her personal needs and agenda. If this occurs, this leader should not be surprised when his or her subordinates do whatever is demanded of them, yet with no esteem. In that case, they do not obey the leader in the true sense of the term. In his Confucianism, Trần Trọng Kim repeatedly reminds people that loyalty and respect for authority always have their limits. Those who are in authority must not acquire the attitude of doing whatever they want because they have power. See Kim T. Trần, Nho Giáo (Confucianism), 209.

23 Peter Phan, Vietnamese-American Catholics, 31.
Collectivism therefore becomes the driving force of all activities and is an inseparable part of Vietnamese culture.

In this communally oriented culture, everyone tries to save face for each other. Loss of face is painful in any society, but unbearable in Vietnam. It is so because in this country the misconduct or failure of an individual is blamed not only on himself but also on his ancestors, parents, siblings, and friends. Likewise, any success achieved by an individual brings honor and pride to his people and the entire community. Because of this communal identity, shared responsibility, and interdependence, whenever the Vietnamese discern anything or decide to follow any order, they often prioritize the collective focus.

This collective focus is encouraged and reinforced by the teachings of other traditions such as Taoism and Buddhism. For example, Buddha always reminded people that they should forget themselves for the sake of their family, their family for the sake of their village, their village for the sake of their nation, and their nation for the sake of Enlightenment. Likewise, Lao Tzu asserted:

There are three treasures that I hold and keep. The first is unconditional love; the second is frugality; the third is one not putting oneself ahead of others. From unconditional love comes courage. From frugality comes generosity. From not putting oneself ahead of others comes leadership. Courage without unconditional love, generosity without frugality, forcing oneself upon people will end in failure.

Leopold Cadière, a missionary of the Paris Foreign Missions Society and a scholar in Vietnamese culture, reminds readers that, in the context of Vietnam, a communal focus does not equate to a consentement, but an accord. To him, a harmonious agreement (accord) is much stronger than a simple consent or assent (consentement). It will maintain harmony more effectively in the community. This harmonious agreement helps people to leave room for differences, and at the same time encourages them to cooperate with each other to find a way to live peacefully with their differences. See Huệ T. Đỗ, Văn Hóa, Tôn Giáo, Tín Ngưỡng Việt Nam Dưới Nhãn Quang Của Học Gia Leopold Cadière (The Culture, Religion and Belief of Vietnamese People through L. Cadière’s Point of View) (Huế: NXB Thuận Hóa, 2006), 186–189.

Note that the concept of collectivism in Vietnam does not totally overshadow individualism. Although the Vietnamese highly value the significance of duty, societal roles, and communal orientation, they do not ignore the value of personal talents and skills. On the contrary, they often seek something more satisfying than the performance of duties. This drive for acceptance and recognition makes them uniformly hardworking and
1.3. Vietnamese biên phân: A method

Certainly harmony, respect for authority, and collectivism are the three main bases for Vietnamese biên phân and vâng phục. These elements are the criteria upon which people rely when they practice these two notions. How then do the Vietnamese apply the principle biên phân in their daily life? How does this method unfold in its concrete steps?

As already mentioned once before, biên phân is a process in which people go through a procedure that involves four actions: being aware of what they internally or externally experience; reflecting carefully on and analyzing those experiences; placing them against the norms and experiences of the whole community and justifying or defending compatible values; and making a decision that further nurtures the harmony in the community. Since these four steps are very similar to those of Bernard Lonergan’s transcendental method, this sub-section will compare these two sets of actions briefly so as to elucidate the Vietnamese method in such a way that it is easier for readers to understand.

The first step of Vietnamese biên phân is to be aware of what they internally or externally experience. This step is similar to the first action mentioned in Lonergan’s transcendental method: experiencing. In the Vietnamese context, however, awareness does not stop at collecting data but extends to the level of mindfulness or meditation in action.

26 In his Method in Theology, Lonergan offers a transcendental method that involves the four actions of experiencing, understanding, judging, and making a decision. He argues that these actions are an inevitable part of human cognitional activities, and that everyone has done so in his or her life. The purpose of this method is to establish a basis for agreement and progress in disciplines such as philosophy and theology, and thus open a window for people to look metaphysically at themselves as transcendental beings in their totality. See Bernard Lonergan, S.J., Method in Theology (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 13–16.

27 I choose to compare these two sets of actions for two reasons. First, this transcendental method reflects a Western mindset and hence a Western method. In a dialogue between the Eastern and Western worlds, a comparison of the methods used by each side will help me to analyze the similarities and differences between them on the one hand, and on the other hand to study how they challenge and enrich each other. Second, to a certain extent, the four actions mentioned in Lonergan’s method describe how Ignatian discernment unfolds in reality.

extremely charming as they seek attention and centrality in any relationship. See Walter H. Slote, George A. DeVos et al., Confucianism and the Family, 147.
When one eats an apple, for instance, one should eat it as if one is performing a rite. When one walks, one should immerse oneself in walking without thinking of anything of the past or the future. Each action is “a full incarnation of one’s whole being into the present moment to the point of recognizing the miracles that always accompany one’s mindful acts.”

The second step is to reflect on and analyze these experiences. This can be compared to Lonergan’s second action: reflecting in order to understand. Unlike Lonergan’s reflection, reflection in biên phán is not an exercise of the mind trying to analyze everything in hopes of coming up with a theory or concept that fits and thereby reaching another level of understanding. Rather, it is a process of living, thinking, narrating, questioning, and reviewing experiences. It requires the whole body’s involvement. In doing so, people not only can understand and describe their experiences in words through a concept but also smell, see, touch, hear, and taste it.

In this second step, people often rely on what they have learned from and experienced in Buddhist, Confucianist, Taoist, and indigenous traditions (especially elements related to harmony, respect for authority, and collectivism). Based on these insights, the Vietnamese ponder questions like the following. Are their intentions, thoughts, speech, livelihood, actions, efforts, mindfulness, and concentration right? Do they attach too much to certain things, and will these things interfere with their effort to be in good relationships with others? Have they yet reached the state of chung yung? What can they do to bring honor rather than shame to themselves, their family, and their community? Which choice(s) would save face for everyone involved, and which choice(s) would show most respect to authority? In what way can they help to enhance or maintain the existing harmony of the group? Which option will better serve the whole society? These questions most likely lead them to set aside their

needs and focus on those of the community. Notice that these questions come from various traditions rather than from one tradition alone. This, once again, reflects the complementary aspect of Vietnamese culture.

The third step is to place their preferred values or choices against the norms and experiences of the whole community to see whether these values or choices are compatible with those of the community. It is equivalent to Lonergan’s step of judging, but with nuances. If Lonergan’s judging often aims at distinguishing good from bad, right from wrong, or white from black, judging in **biến phân** focuses on complementarity. This tendency leads the Vietnamese to center on questions like “how do things which appear very negative at this time, fit into this harmonious cosmos? What role do they have in the human life? Which aspects of those things are contrary to human flourishing and which aspects are complementary? Should we embrace this particular option rather than another, and what is the reason behind this preference?” In other words, this step emphasizes the compatibility and fitness of an act in the life of a person and the life of the whole community, rather than the act itself. The focal point of Vietnamese **biến phân** is not the “what” but the “how”, not so much a solution but a way of relating and living.

The last step of this method is to make a choice. It is equivalent to making a decision in Lonergan’s method. Lonergan’s decision-making is a metaphysical step in which people are encouraged to act on the resulting knowledge that comes through a process of assessing the empirical data (experiencing), intellectualizing it (understanding), rationally evaluating the first and second steps (judging), and finally responding to the whole thing with an act (deciding). The purpose of Lonergan’s way of making a decision is not so much about the benefit of an individual or a community. Rather, it is about the rightness of an act, and more
importantly, about the performance of the subject, e.g., a being that makes a decision, who in so doing responds to his or her metaphysical status as a transcendental being.\textsuperscript{29}

The Vietnamese are not interested in discerning just for the sake of affirming themselves as cognitive, epistemic and transcendental beings. It neither means that they do not want to affirm anything nor that they want to reject the transcendental characteristic of the human race. Living in a culture that recognizes God’s spirit in all things, a tree, an animal, the sun, or a river, they do not see a reason for affirming the superiority of one species or entity over the others. Therefore, unlike Lonergan’s method of decision-making, the point of making a choice in \textit{biên phân} is to finalize and complete a circle of engaging and nurturing the relationship between the Heaven, Earth, and Humanity (\textit{Thiên–Địa–Nhân}). Its goal is the harmony and flourishing of the community.

What has been presented thus far helps one to understand the Vietnamese notions of discernment and obedience, their bases and process. It is legitimate for one to ponder the advantages and disadvantages of this method. It is also helpful to ask whether there is any potential impediment that may prevent the Vietnamese from discerning according to the Ignatian tradition.

\textbf{2. Advantages and disadvantages of Vietnamese \textit{biên phân} and \textit{vâng phục}}

\textbf{2.1. Advantages of Vietnamese \textit{biên phân} and \textit{vâng phục}}

Vietnamese \textit{biên phân} and \textit{vâng phục} always place harmony at the center. The advantage of this emphasis is that it leads people to cooperate with each other, even if their positions are different. In doing so, they can arrive at a reasonable approach that helps everybody in the society to flourish. To a certain extent, this harmonious end-goal plays the

role of inspiration, as it stirs up in people’s hearts a desire to be flexible, open, and adaptive so as to make use of the opportunities that lie behind their differences. Because of the desire to maintain a peaceful environment for the whole community, people often try to act according to the situation. Confucius spoke of this adaptation to the situation at hand in terms of “appropriateness” or “reasonableness.” To encourage people to act appropriately according to the situation, Confucius advises:

The superior man does what is proper to the station in which he is; he does not desire to go beyond this. In a position of wealth and honor, he does what is proper to a position of wealth and honor. In a poor and low position, he does what is proper to a poor and low position. Situated among barbarous tribes, he does what is proper to a situation among barbarous tribes. In a position of sorrow and difficulty, he does what is proper to a position of sorrow and difficulty. The superior man can find himself in no situation in which he is not himself. In a high situation, he does not treat with contempt his inferiors. In a low situation, he does not court the favor of his superiors. He rectifies himself and seeks for nothing from others so that he has no dissatisfactions. He does not murmur against Heaven, nor grumble against men. Thus, it is that the superior man is quiet and calm, waiting for the appointments of Heaven, while the mean man walks in dangerous paths, looking for lucky occurrences.30

Another advantage of the Vietnamese way of discerning and obeying is that people always choose relationships over everything else. This preference encourages them to use their virtues first; and only if this approach cannot help to change a situation should people use other means such as legal action to achieve their goal. In the five basic relationships, nothing but the dimension of love counts. The relationship between the leader and his subjects, for example, is built on a foundation of mutual affection rather than coercion. In this relationship, the subjects view the leader as their heart. The leader sees the subjects as his body. If the heart is just and right, the body is healthy and peaceful. If the heart is joyful, the body is happy. Without the body, the heart cannot exist. Without the heart, the body cannot

survive. This view leads people to desire not only the leader’s order but also his or her intention, because they understand that the purpose of obedience is not compliance but the relationship that helps both parties to be true humans.

The third advantage of Vietnamese bién phàn and vâng phục is its great respect for hierarchy, especially toward the ancestors and elders. This respect for hierarchy leads the Vietnamese to view filial piety as a critical requirement because it is a means of expressing their appreciation, reverence, and loyalty to authority. In fact, an emphasis on filial piety more often than not helps them to practice their obedience with love.

One further advantage is a willingness on the part of the individual to sacrifice his or her needs for the needs of the community. This communal focus brings people together and strengthens the union between them. It helps them to understand that they can only be true humans when they are in a relationship with the entire group and that their identities are closely related to that of the community. Such a realization prevents them from being so egocentric and selfish.

2.2. Disadvantages of Vietnamese bién phàn and vâng phục

“All theories are limited by their presuppositions and methods.” The Vietnamese method of discerning and obeying is no exception. Having a harmonious environment for all is a good thing, but an over-emphasis on this element can be a disadvantage. It may lead people to view harmony as merely the cessation of hostilities in the community. In the name of peacefulness, the Vietnamese have a tendency to embrace relationship-based (tình) rather than rule-based (lý) behaviors. To them, relying too much on rules and regulations will make people rigid, which in turn will threaten the communal harmony. Yet trying to be flexible by

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embracing all opposite positions or focusing solely on relationships is not necessarily a good choice. On the contrary, such a choice can be a disadvantage because an over-dependence on relationships may lead people to lawlessness and unfairness. Moreover, when people try hard to keep their relationships positive, they will most likely use an “avoidance strategy” in conflict management. When this happens, the harmony they gain is only superficial and temporary because the source of conflict is still there.\footnote{Peter Phan raises this concern in his \textit{Vietnamese-American Catholics}. He warns of the danger of viewing harmony as a goal in itself and hence refusing to resolve the conflict that exists in the community. See Peter Phan, \textit{Vietnamese-American Catholics}, 82.}

Vietnamese discernment and obedience emphasize adaptation and complementarity. This focus promotes an attitude of openness to practices that are different from their own. It protects people from being exclusive and unwilling to accept the beauty and truth in others. It helps people to broaden their horizons and enrich their values. The danger (and hence another disadvantage) of this emphasis is that people may unconsciously forget the distinction between relativism and pluralism. Thus, instead of trying to cultivate an all-embracing and complementary way of thinking, they acquire an attitude of being so inclusive that they do not recognize or are indifferent to their core values. They embrace syncretism and accept everything as if there were no distinction between competing viewpoints. The ultimate truth may not mean much to them then.

Asian people in general and the Vietnamese people in particular often have a high regard for reasonableness. To them, the more an act is accepted by the community, the more it is reasonable. This viewpoint affects the way they discern. Many times they choose an option because it is the option that many other people accept, and thus it is the most reasonable choice. This tendency leads them to serious problems, because the fact that an act is accepted by others does not necessarily mean that it is reasonable. The members of a
community may choose a particular option because they are ignorant of its causes and consequences. Alternatively, they may choose it either because they are forced to accept it (in the form of manipulation or violence) or because they have nearsighted interests. They thus unconsciously forget the fact that an act accepted by many in a community against humanity will never be reasonable. Hence, a high regard for acceptance can be another disadvantage of Vietnamese biên phân and vâng phục.

In the process of discerning and obeying, the Vietnamese people stress the importance of respect, hierarchical order, and loyalty. The problem arises when people begin to forgo discernment for the sake of obedience, especially if the result of their discernment is very different from that of the authority. Worse still, they may practice their obedience without paying attention to their own responsibility. They simply do whatever the leader tells them to do and forget to reflect or to question. It is so because in Vietnam loyalty does not stop at gratifying a command but extends to actively participating in what will benefit the superior. A disadvantage of this emphasis, however, is that people may fall into the habit of focusing on the wellbeing of the leader, not reflecting on whether he or she is a benevolent king or a tyrant, and forgoing not only their own benefit but also that of the community for the sake of one person. In doing so, they contradict the core value of being an Asian: to be community-oriented.

The next disadvantage relates to an emphasis on collectivism. Although collectivism plays some positive roles in helping people to live more humanely, it can be a double-edged sword. There are many things that need to be reexamined if one wants adopts such an orientation. Will collectivism enhance or threaten the dignity of a human person? What will

happen to the minority voices that are not found to be credible to the group? What will happen when power is misused in the community, and an enforced but uneasy compliance results? Is there any room for equality, freedom, human rights, justice, and genuine democracy, or should these factors be viewed as irrelevant in a collective culture? Do people know the difference between de-privatization and de-personalization? Do they realize that true collectivism challenges people to be de-privatized rather than de-personalized? What is the role of personal conscience? Unfortunately, the Vietnamese often take this communal orientation for granted, and hence they tend to ignore these questions. This is a disadvantage in the process of discerning and obeying according to Vietnamese tradition.

Finally, honor and shame are very importance in Vietnam. When one achieves something that is significant, one brings honor not only to oneself but also to one’s family, village, or even country. On the contrary, if one does anything wrong, the blame and shame will fall upon everyone to and with whom one relates and associates. Therefore, when the Vietnamese discern or practice their obedience, they bring this system of honor and shame into consideration. This can become a great disadvantage because, as Anodea Judith asserts, “shame often creates a block between the mind and body that splits a person from the core of self.”35 The formation of such a blockage may threaten the authenticity of people’s discernment and obedience.

3. **Potential impediments for Ignatian discernment in the Vietnamese context**

Given the overview above of Vietnamese *biên phán* and *vâng phúc*, as well as their advantages and disadvantages, one should ask at this point whether there is any impediment to a Vietnamese person entering into a discernment process according to Ignatian tradition.

To answer this question, one needs to attend to four requirements in the Ignatian way of proceeding. The first requirement is to have an ongoing loving relationship with God. In the Ignatian tradition, this relationship is unfolded and maintained by a good relationship with Christ, which is built on the foundation of love—a love that leads people to place God at the center of everything. The second prerequisite is to understand one’s desire and ponder whether it is rightly ordered, i.e., toward loving God and longing to do His will in order to glorify His name. Another requirement is to be open to new perspectives, be flexible and willing to dialogue, be active and cooperative, and be able to use both mind and heart. Finally, the whole process will lose its authenticity if one does not have freedom. In fact, without freedom, discernment can never be sound, and obedience can never be an imitation of Jesus’ obedience to the Father.

3.1. **A personal relationship with Christ**

In Vietnam, people do not have any problem with the advice that they should have an ongoing relationship with God. All Vietnamese, educated and uneducated alike, experience the presence of an Immanent God in their daily lives. Thus, the first requirement may not be a burden on them. Yet when it comes to a personal relationship with Christ, they begin to have questions. On the one hand, they know that discernment is not simply about making decisions but about having a better relationship with God, self, and others. On the other hand, they may wonder about the meaning of a so-called “good relationship with Christ.”

The content of their puzzlement, of course, is not the necessity or relevance of the relationship itself, because in Vietnam relationship precedes everything. The relationship, however, has no meaning until they know the person with whom they interact. Hence, they probably ask a series of questions similar to ones that Aloysius Pieris once asked: Who is this
Christ? Is He “a Broken Body of India Christ”—the One who has a close association with the lower caste, as portrayed in Dalit theology? Is He “a Han-Ridden Body of the Korean Christ” as discussed in the Minjung theology of the oppressed? Is He “the Bread-Feeding Christa of Asian Womanhood,” as captured by Chung Hyun Kyung? Is He “a Third-World Christ of Asia,” where almost 97 percent of people are non-Christians and many of whom are atheist Marxists? Or is He “the First-Born Son, the Eldest Brother in the family,” as suggested by Peter Phan?36

It is important to remember that the Christian faith is both personal and communal. It is communal in the sense that people will journey together in their search for the absolute truth, i.e., God. It is personal in the sense that on such a journey each individual must develop a personal relationship with Christ, and no one can do it on behalf of someone else. Everyone must answer the question “who is Christ?” for him or herself. The Vietnamese have been told (or forced to accept at times) that for them Christ must be the only Savior without whom no one has salvation.37 It is not that they want to reject this claim. Rather, at issue is the coerciveness that forces them to accept the claim before they have any chance to know and


37 Christianity always affirms the idea that Christ must be the only Savior without whom no one has salvation. In fact, in one of its documents, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith insists that “it must therefore be firmly believed as a truth of Catholic faith that the universal salvific will of the One and Triune God is offered and accomplished once for all in the mystery of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of God” and that “those solutions that propose a salvific action of God beyond the unique mediation of Christ would be contrary to Christian and Catholic faith” (#14). Likewise, paragraph 21 of the same document states that “it is clear that it would be contrary to the faith to consider the Church as one way of salvation alongside those constituted by the other religions, seen as complementary to the Church or substantially equivalent to her, even if these are said to be converging with the Church toward the eschatological kingdom of God.” See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Dominus Iesus (August 6, 2000). See http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-jesus_en.html, accessed on September 30, 2016. Given such a strong insistence, it is understandable for the Jesuit missionaries (and the local Catholic Church in Vietnam even now) emphasize the need of accepting Christ as the Only Savior. Here, I do not try to suggest anything that is contrary to the Christian faith. I only want to point out the fact that it is not the claim that becomes a potential impediment. Rather, it is the way the messengers deliver that claim. In reality, the Vietnamese people may not see an idea that Christ is their only Savior as a problem. It becomes an issue only when they are forced to accept without having enough time to explore, reflect, and accept it with freedom.
thereby develop a close relationship with Christ. This coerciveness can be a potential impediment for Ignatian discernment in a true Vietnamese setting.

3.2. Issue of desire

Those who want to discern according to the Ignatian tradition cannot avoid a question proposed by their spiritual companions: “What is your deepest desire?” This question appears to be very helpful to many people, except those whose culture is influenced by Buddhism and Taoism. According to the second Noble Truth (Dukkha) of Buddhism, desire is the cause of suffering and the reason people must go through a circle of samsâra (reincarnation). This notion leads people to have a negative view of desire, and thus they often try to subdue it whenever they can. To them, those who persist in desiring will bring resentment and confusion not only to themselves but also to the entire community. Hence, the advice to find out what one truly wants seems to be contradictory advice.

Likewise, although Taoism does not reject or repress human desire, it always upholds the importance of detachment. It even advises people to sit back, relax, and enjoy life by embracing the wu-wei (non-action) approach rather than actively search for what they want. The only desire, if any, should be to work according to the Way of the Tao.38

More confusingly, in a collective culture such as that of Vietnam, an individual desire is not as important as a communal one. Even if one personally yearns for something, that yearning must reflect the needs of the community. From the collectivist’s perspective, an individual who stands out from the group disrupts harmony. Thus, in a manner different from Western nations where “the squeaky wheel gets the grease,” in Vietnam and many other Asian countries such as Japan or China, the tallest nail will be hammered down. This does

38 Tuân M. Lý, Triết Lý Chữ Hòa (Harmony and Its Philosophy), 118.
not mean that a person should not desire anything. Rather, it indicates that an outright question about personal yearning is not an appropriate question in this setting, and hence it can be an obstacle to Ignatian discernment.

3.3. **Invitation to be active**

The Vietnamese people see passiveness as a virtue. Behaviors such as being silent in front of superiors, not raising any objection to their ideas, minimizing verbal communication, and anticipating their will through their non-verbal expressions are often considered to be proper. If there is a need for dialogue, it must come from the leader’s initiation or else it is a sign of disrespect. When people converse with the leader, they have to be very careful because what they say can be interpreted as an objection or quarrel (a “harmony killer”) or as an effort to break the established hierarchy (an unforgivable act according to Vietnamese tradition, regardless of how right they are). Thus, a requirement that one should be active and willing to engage in dialogue may not appear to be a good one.

Indeed, although passiveness is not a negative thing, it often discourages people from being active and prevents them from having a constructive dialogue with others, especially with authority. Hence, even when they are not satisfied with an order, they will habitually choose to keep silent and obey it because they want to show respect to the hierarchy and save face for both sides. Such an act, of course, can become an obstacle for their discernment.

3.4. **Issue of individual freedom**

In the context of Vietnam, individual freedom only makes sense in and through communal freedom. In fact, to ensure communal harmony, people are expected to suppress

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39 It is also true in their relationship with God. The Vietnamese people expect to hear from God more than to share their thoughts with Him. They tend to gaze at God rather than to talk to Him. If they ever have to pray verbally, it will be in the form of a memorized prayer rather than a spontaneous and intimate conversation.
or at least set aside their freedom when it is in conflict with the society. Given this tendency, can one be free enough to identify personal desires so as to enter the process of Ignatian discernment? Is there a risk that one may confuse communal freedom with one’s own and thereby discern based on a misunderstanding? One suspects that each of these questions can be answered in the affirmative. Thus, the Vietnamese view on personal freedom can potentially be another impediment to this Ignatian practice.

3.5. Competition in the order of obedience to the hierarchy

Out of respect for authority, the Vietnamese frequently let the leader discern for them, and they will accept any outcome. The problem, however, is that the subordinate usually confuses the leader’s discernment with his own and that the leader often takes it as if he or she discerns on behalf of everyone. Some leaders may even think that they have the right to discern autonomously, and thus reduce the subordinate’s freedom to a null. The consultative purpose of this type of discernment becomes a decisive one.

In addition to a tendency to passively let the authority determine their future, the Vietnamese often are too obedient. They sometimes will not even want to enter into a discernment process for fear that the result may be different from that of the leader. Of course, they will discern if the superior wants them to do so. Yet the power of obedience will overshadow everything. In their mind, there is nothing but the will of the leader. It appears that they are not truly free when they enter into this process, and therefore the authenticity of discernment is at stake.

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40 Although they do not reject the importance of discernment, many leaders do not take it seriously, especially when it comes to the point of letting their subordinates have a share in the process. They either do not trust the subordinates’ capacity to discern or are too confident in their own capacity. When there is a difference between the outcomes of their own and their subordinates’ discernment, they tend to believe that the result of their discernment is closer to God’s will, and hence they quickly dismiss the others’ or take it lightly. There is little concern about how they can both reexamine what has happened to discover what God truly wants. The dialogue between them becomes a one-way dialogue.
De Rhodes shares with his readers many stories relating to the issue of obedience. For example, in his *Travels and Missions*, he writes: “The Vietnamese consider the missionaries as angels, and hence, it would be an honor for them to obey the fathers in all things, large or small alike.”41 Because of this, many Vietnamese men sent away their concubines when de Rhodes ordered them to do so. They likewise obeyed when de Rhodes asserted that they should distance themselves from their idolatrous past and, if possible, reveal that intention publicly. Many local new converts took this assertion as an order. They sent away their concubines and publicly destroyed pictures and statues of local gods.42 Their actions created much tension between Christianity and other religions, thus indirectly destroying the communal harmony.

Of course, not all the Vietnamese who met de Rhodes followed his advice. Some even walked away from de Rhodes. The decision of those who either agreed or disagreed with de Rhodes, however, did not come from a proper discernment, but from their evaluation of competing claims within the order of hierarchy. The topic of their discernment (if any) was not about what God wanted but who had higher authority, the civil leader or de Rhodes. Some placed the king above de Rhodes, and thus they decided to obey the king. These people rejected de Rhodes’ idea because it was the king who wanted them to practice the cult of ancestors and have more children, even if it meant having many concubines.43 Others

42 Of course, de Rhodes did not endorse or ask the Vietnamese Christians to publicly destroy pictures and statues of local gods. Yet his insistence on a clear distance from their idolatrous past did not help to restrain the overzealousness of these new converts. See Chính Q. Đỗ, S.J., *Dòng Tên Trong Xã Hội Đại Việt 1615-1773* (*Society of Jesus in the Vietnamese Society 1615-1773*) (Hồ Chí Minh: NXB Tôn Giáo, 2008), 156–157.
43 The Lord of Tonkin even reminded de Rhodes that it was his order that the Vietnamese should have concubines to produce many offspring for the sake of the country. See Alexandre de Rhodes, *Hành Trình và Truyền Giáo* (*The Travels and Missions*), trans. Xuyên K. Nguyễn, 124.
believed that de Rhodes (spiritually) had higher authority than the earthly king, and hence they would do what he ordered.

De Rhodes also recalls the story of a high-ranking officer who expressed his desire for his entire family to become Catholics. This officer even warned his children that he would disown them if they refused his request. Out of filial piety and a desire to obey their father, the children immediately did what the father wanted. Their decision obviously did not come from an authentic discernment but from a threat and a manipulative tactic. Once again, this story reminds one how hard it is for a Vietnamese person to discern according to the Ignatian tradition. Indeed, in the context of Vietnam, obedience often takes control of the whole process. Because of that, it can be an impediment for Ignatian discernment.

4. The possibility of having an authentic Ignatian discernment in a true Vietnamese context.

There is no doubt that the negative influences of East–West differences, the disadvantages of the Vietnamese way of discerning and obeying, and the possible impediments mentioned in the previous pages will make it harder for the Vietnamese to discern according to the Ignatian tradition. Nevertheless, every negative experience requires positive thinking as an antidote. Instead of being paralyzed by the significance of a problem, one should ask another question: what opportunity exists in this situation? Opportunities are always present in the midst of difficulties and differences. Whenever difficulties seem to present an impossibility or a crisis, one should remember that a crisis is a meeting place between entrapment and possibilities—a place where several questions and considerations

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are pressing on one and demanding one’s attention. If one pays attention to them, one widens one’s horizon and becomes open to change.

4.1. **Possibility of an authentic desire**

It is true that in the third Noble Truth (*Nirodha Dukkha*), Buddhism advises people to suppress their desires so as to end suffering. This advice must not be understood too literally. Buddhism never entails that all desires are equally negative, or else it would contradict itself. A desire to get rid of desires in order to end suffering and achieve enlightenment is a desire in and of itself. What Buddhism teaches is that one should not attach oneself to any earthly and disordered tendencies. Buddha did not intend to make desire a problem. The problem, as Tara Brach asserts, is “not our inclination as living beings to have wants and needs, but our habit of clinging to experience that must, by nature, pass away.”

The invitation to detach oneself from earthly desires also appears in Taoism: “The more you desire, the more you will be discontented from what you have. The Sage fills his belly, not his eyes. The Sage satisfies his inner desires with what cannot be seen, not with the external temptations of the world.” In other words, Taoism advises people to attach themselves to nothing but their inner desires, that is, to be one with the *Tao*.

Ironically, these views are not very different from those of Ignatius. Many suggestions in the *Spiritual Exercises* are closely related to the idea of removing oneself from disordered affections and being one with God. Of course, the question about a person’s deepest desire often creates confusion. On the one hand, this question asks one to see everything from God’s perspective. To this the Vietnamese have no objection. But on the

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47 *Sp.Ex.* #1, 21, 23, 157, and 169.
other hand, the question appears to be so individualistic that it makes them feel uncomfortable, given their collective inclinations.

The window of opportunity will open when the person helping them to discern according to the Ignatian tradition (e.g., a spiritual director) clearly explains what it means to be in touch with their deep desires and the true purpose behind it. This person may explain to his Vietnamese counterpart that when they discern (for instance) whether they should dedicate their lives to serve God and others as medical doctors, they should not simply reflect on what they personally want to do. They should also reflect on whether such a choice is God’s will for them, and whether it helps them to benefit the community. In other words, they wonder if the choice they are about to make will keep them in union with the Tao and be helpful to the whole society. Such guidance reflects a willingness to see things through the Eastern both-and lens. It also indicates a readiness to recognize the value of the Vietnamese tradition rather than to dismiss or patronize it. If a spiritual director can achieve this balance, his or her dialogue partners will appreciate it. They will then not object to the other’s idea, and the issue of being in touch with their deepest desire will no longer be an impediment to them.

4.2. Possibility of having a personal relationship with Christ

Having a personal relationship with Christ and accepting an absolute claim about Him become an issue only when there is coerciveness. The Vietnamese often value relationships more than anything else. Yet they need to know the other person well before they enter into the relationship with him or her. If one refrains from imposing or making absolute statements about Christ when one interacts with the Vietnamese; if one instead presents an objective picture of Christ and allows the Vietnamese to come to know Him themselves; and if one lets
the others indirectly place Christ at the center of their discernment in the form of harmony, as they often do in their *biên phán*—then the opportunity is wide open.

Of course, this does not mean that Western missionaries cannot proclaim their conviction that Christ is the only Savior of the human race. On the contrary, these missionaries may present their belief and use it to challenge and invite the Vietnamese to enter into a discernment process pondering the role of Christ in their lives. Such an approach will increase mutual respect and understanding and reduce suspicion and unnecessary tension.

4.3. Possibility behind passiveness

Although passiveness may be a hindrance for Ignatian discernment, it is not an unsurmountable stumbling block. The suggestion of being active in discernment does not mean that those who are passive cannot enter into this process. Due to a high regard for their superiors, the Vietnamese are more enthusiastic to hear a superior’s decision than to enter into a discernment process themselves. This is the core of the problem. Thus, if the superior reveals his or her eagerness to see things from the viewpoint of the subjects, then the problem of passiveness will diminish. It will also further diminish if this leader initiates a genuine conversation with the subjects and helps them to understand that he or she does not have any pre-determined choice and will not make any decision until both sides finish the process of discernment, and if the superior allows the others to use the method with which they are most comfortable to discern.

4.4. Possibility in communal freedom and communal emphasis

Can one turn the difficulty of freedom and collectivism into an opportunity? The answer to this question is affirmative. In Vietnam, individual freedom only makes sense in
and through the freedom of the community. Accordingly, people often suppress or set aside their freedom and their needs if they are in conflict with the community. This tendency does not necessarily close the window of opportunity for one to enter into Ignatian discernment. Such a window can still open if the Vietnamese are reminded of two things. First, authentic autonomy will help them to assert their individuality and take appropriate responsibility for themselves. Second, an emphasis on communal freedom and needs does not mean that each person has no personal responsibility. On the contrary, he or she still has the obligation to secure his or her own identity, freedom, and benefit by working harder to secure those of the community.

For example, in the Jesuit “Principle and Foundation,” one is taught to praise, reverence, and serve God, and by means of doing this to save one’s own soul. Such advice does not prevent one from helping others to achieve that end goal. Hence, instead of focusing too much on the second part of the sentence (i.e., saving one’s own soul), the Vietnamese should be counseled to embrace the both-and approach: aim at both helping the entire community to discern the will of God and through that very act fulfill their duty to do so for themselves. For, according to Vietnamese culture, the identity and needs of one’s community are those of one’s own self. Likewise, the Vietnamese should be challenged to occasionally step outside their ordinary method to practice the either-or approach and pay attention to personal needs. Such an act, in turn, will expand their horizon and help them to be indifferent (in the Ignatian sense) or to be in the state of chung yung (in the Confucian sense).

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48 *Sp.Ex. #23.*

49 Conversely, the other party (e.g., Westerners), should try once in a while to do the same (orienting themselves towards communal values more than those of the individual and embracing the both-and approach) so as to acquire a better understanding.
4.5. **Possibility in the Vietnamese way of obeying**

The highest barrier to discerning according to the Ignatian tradition in the Vietnamese context is the issue of obedience itself. Undeniably, the concept of Vietnamese vâng phực (obedience) often overpowers everything including the practice of biên phán (discernment). Although vâng phực does not prevent the Vietnamese from entering into a discernment process, it indirectly takes away their freedom to do so. Regardless of the topic of discernment, the desire to surrender their will to that of the superior has already predetermined the outcome of discernment, and hence they often force themselves to discern over and over again until the outcome of their discernment is similar to that of the superior. If they cannot reach this conclusion, they often choose to keep the result of their discernment to themselves rather than to share it with the superior. Other times, this predetermination leads them to discern just for the sake of formality rather than for the authenticity of the process.

To turn this barrier into an opportunity, Vietnamese people will need to pay attention to several factors.

First, the root of the issue is a high regard for authority, which is in and of itself a good thing. Nevertheless, the Vietnamese must realize that this respect for authority does not require them to surrender their dignity. They must remember that the aim of this virtue is to create a spirit of loyalty, harmony, and gratefulness within the community rather than to support a dictatorship. In fact, Asian culture in general, and Vietnamese culture in particular, allows people to disobey or even overthrow a leader if he or she is a tyrant.\(^5\) Thus, there is no reason for them to hold the view that out of respect for authority they must not discern or say anything that is contrary to those who are in leadership.

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Likewise, although in the culture of Vietnam loyalty toward authority must be cultivated, such loyalty requires two actions. The first action asks one to do what the superior demands. The second action, which is more important, asks one to seek out the ultimate benefit of the superior, even if it means not carrying out certain orders that one judges to be harmful to the latter. Walter Slote emphasizes this point in his *Confucianism and the Family*:

A developed loyal person will seek out the ultimate benefit of the master rather than immediately gratifying any command. If need be, an individual may go against the superior’s wish when, in their considered loyal judgment, carrying out these immediate commands would be detrimental to their superior’s ultimate benefit.\(^{51}\)

Indeed, when this cloud of misunderstanding clears up, one sees a ray of light.

Second, the purpose of Vietnamese *biên phân* and *vâng phục* is to maintain a harmonious environment and secure the maximum benefit of the community. It is not to serve the benefit of the superior or to ensure the superior’s peace of mind alone. In fact, the community in the Vietnamese context always trumps the individual, even if that individual is in authority. As a result, the role of a superior is to help his or her community achieve not his or her own goal but communal ones. Therefore, when people discern and believe that the result of their discernment may contribute greatly to the entire community, they are obligated to voice it, despite the fact that their leader may not like the idea. Certainly, differences between the leader and the subjects, at times, may become a hindrance to harmony. Yet when differences are present in precise proper positions (often known as *chung*), and when they are brought together to form a unity, harmony will result. As Fung Yu-Lan correctly asserts, the purpose of harmony is that “all things are nurtured together without injuring one another. All courses are pursued without collision.”\(^{52}\)

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Third, in Vietnam, there is a hierarchical order concerning obedience. In such an order, God always comes first, then after Him the emperor, officials, parents, siblings, and finally friends. When one receives multiple orders from different people, one can rely on this hierarchical order to decide which command one should follow first. In the context of Vietnam, people do not explicitly place God at the center of their discernment.\(^5\) His presence, nonetheless, is still there in the form of ultimate harmony. In other words, they place Him at the center without being explicit about it. Hence, if the Vietnamese pay attention to this hierarchical order, they will realize that God’s desire, rather than that of a particular leader, should be the center of the whole process. They then can enter into their Ignatian discernment with peace.

Finally, to ensure the possibility of turning obedience into an opportunity for Ignatian discernment, the leader must constantly practice self-cultivation (tu thân). Without self-cultivation, this leader will always place himself or herself above others. He or she will dismiss the others’ ideas and/or contributions with the thought that the others are trying to teach a fish how to swim (múa rìu qua màt thơ), or to prove that an egg can be smarter than a duck (trứng khôn hơn vịt). Mencius insists that if a man wants to be a true leader, he must trust, respect, and treat the subjects the way he wants to be treated in return.\(^5\)

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\(^5\) When we translate the term “God” into Vietnamese, it means Chúa, Thượng Đế (Tien), or Ông Trời (Heaven). Such meanings include but not limit to the Triune God that Christians often use. Hence, the usage of this term is apt not only for Christian Vietnamese but also for Confucian or Daoist or Buddhist.

\(^5\) Mencius recommended the restoration of trust between ruler and subject as the precondition for reestablishing this particular proper relationship. Obviously, the love between father and son and the duty or righteousness existing between a ruler and his subjects are not transferable, but the spirit of mutuality underlies both of them. In the case of the ruler-subject relationship, Mencius unequivocally states that the prince must earn the support of his ministers: “If a prince treats his ministers as his hands and feet, they will treat him as their belly and heart. If he treats them as his horses and hounds, they will treat him as a mere fellow countryman. If he treats them as mud and weeds, they will treat him as an enemy.” See D.C. Lau (trans.), Mencius (New York: Penguin Classics, 2004), 90. Or see Walter H. Slote, George A. DeVos et al., Confucianism and the Family, 126.
All of what has been presented thus far indicates that, although there are real hindrances that may prevent a Vietnamese person from entering into a discernment process according to the Ignatian tradition, the possibilities of having an authentic Ignatian discernment in a true Vietnamese context are always present. These possibilities are a great opportunity for the engagement between Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture. The next chapter will deepen the study of this engagement in hope of arriving at a mutually enriched dialogue.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{55} To a certain extent, Chapter 5 is a further elaboration of the fourth chapter. I choose to do so to maintain a reasonable length in each chapter.
Chapter Five

Engagement between Ignatian Spirituality and Vietnamese Culture

In his *Models of Contextual Theology*, Stephen Bevans offers an observation about the relationship between a person and a foreign culture. He asserts: “On the one hand, a person may not be able to share the full experience of another culture, which is different from his or her own. On the other hand, if this person is open and willing, he or she will be able to participate and provide fresh views of that culture and effectively bring out some shadows that the insiders may not be able to do so.”¹ This assertion reminds people of the fact that, if they want to engage reciprocally with another culture, they need to be aware of two things. First, regardless of how much they know about the other culture, they should be humble and remember that such knowledge is always limited and does not necessarily reflect the whole truth. Second, reciprocity can only take place when people set aside their hidden agendas, present their views in a constructive rather than destructive way, and be ready to learn and receive from others. Moreover, they should not forget that “reciprocity must mean more than turning people into images of ourselves by giving them our language and expecting them to adopt our ways of thinking and acting. It must mean that we will receive from others, just as they will receive from us.”²

An attitude of being humble and a willingness to learn and receive from others are crucial requirements for the interaction between Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture. In the engagement between these two entities, there are many things that both sides can learn from one another. Given its limitations, this chapter will only study three main areas that strongly influence the way people practice their discernment and obedience. These areas include the Ignatian and Vietnamese views on the human relationship with the Divine, the method that each side has used, and the issues of harmony, inner peace, detachment, and indifference. In each area, the chapter will focus on how Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture contribute to and challenge each other in a life-giving mutuality. On this foundation, the chapter will revisit the areas of discernment and obedience through the lens of an Asian model introduced by Lao Tzu and elaborated by Quý Hoàng, a Vietnamese Jesuit philosopher. I will examine whether this model can help both sides to develop a better way of dialoguing.

1. **Contributions and challenges in their views on the human relationship with the Divine**

When Jesuit missionaries arrived in Asia, they expected difficulties in presenting an image of the most powerful God who creates and governs all things according to His benevolent will. They thought it would be difficult to talk about the God who enlightens people so that they can distinguish good from bad, light from dark, and right from wrong. To their surprise, this was not the case in Vietnam. Though the Vietnamese were not fond of an emphasis on the distinctions between things, their view of the Divine was not very far from

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3 The Taoist tradition puts great emphasis on detachment, non-action, and non-contrivance. Such an approach can be observed in the way the water flows. Based on this observation, Lao Tzu advised people to discern, act, and live well according to the behavior of the water; and in so doing, he insisted, they would find peace. See Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, translated by Ngọc T. Vũ (Hồ Chí Minh: NXB Tổng Hợp Tp. Hồ Chí Minh, 2011), 54 and 175. Also, see Quý S. Hoàng, S.J., *Thân Học Thiêng Liêng* (*Sacred Theology*) (Hồ Chí Minh: Tòa Tổng Giám Mục Tp. Hồ Chí Minh, 1997), 78ff.
that of the missionaries. In fact, regardless of their faith traditions, the Vietnamese often put their trust in the Supreme Being. Some sayings such as “mọi sự bởi trời mà có” (everything comes from God), “Trời sinh voi, Trời sinh cỏ” (if God creates the elephant, He will create grass for its nutrition), or “sinh kỳ tử quy” (life is a journey, death a true return) reflect a belief that God is the One who creates and oversees all things.

Despite this common view, and despite the fact that both sides directly or indirectly view God as the foundation of their discernment, Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture have different ways of relating to the Divine. If the former invites people to find God in all things, the latter encourages people to see all things as One, being united in One Supreme Being. If the former advises people to actively search for God, the latter urges them to be silent and passively enter into the mystery of life. The latter admits that the distance between God and humans is so great that no word or explanation can be satisfactory. If Ignatian spirituality teaches people how to pray using their memory, imagination and senses, Vietnamese culture challenges them to think of nothing, only breath and listen, and immerse themselves in God’s mysterious presence.

On the surface, these differences seem to create further distance between the two worlds. In reality, they complement each other and result in a more balanced position. Indeed, being active in a search for God may lead people to rely too much on themselves and to forget that listening and surrendering must be key elements in their spiritual life. This is why Vietnamese culture challenges others not to think too much about God but to immerse themselves in God’s mystery so as to experience it deeply from within. On the other hand,

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being too passive may impoverish human understanding of God and may prevent people from having a personal relationship with Him. Thus, Ignatian spirituality calls upon Vietnamese culture to be in touch with its rationality so that people can understand God in an intellectual way.

In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius invites people to use everything they have, including memory, knowledge, and the senses, to imaginatively place themselves in the context of the Biblical narratives so that they can pray and comprehend what God wants to teach them. Though these exercises aim at leading people to a heartfelt understanding, they are still exercises of the mind. Because of that, many Vietnamese exercitants do not know how to bridge the gap that exists between their intellect and their true experience of the depths of existence. Thus, they tend to misunderstand the Ignatian way of meditating and view it as a product of rationalism. The Vietnamese will rather insist on the need for going beyond the limits of activity and entering into the depths of contemplation, even when they are acting.

If the Vietnamese pay close attention to the true purpose of these exercises, they will recognize a challenge not to reject the necessity of being in action, but to let their active lives feed on contemplation. Conversely, if their Western counterparts reflect on the Vietnamese concerns about the limitation of human activities, they will hear an invitation to develop a strong interior awareness, which encourages them to let their contemplation inform their active lives. Such mutual complementarity, Quý Hoàng suggests, helps both sides to better understand each other and achieve balance.

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6 Though this can be an issue for all exercitants, it is much harder for the Vietnamese because they live in a culture that has a special love for mysticism. Such love leads them to journey into their inner-self to encounter God in silence rather than rationalizing too much about the relationship itself.

7 Quý S. Hoàng, S.J., *Thần Học Thiêng Liêng (Sacred Theology)*, 135.
Vietnamese culture also challenges other cultures not to make their theological arguments too abstract, and to acknowledge potential contradictions. For instance, both East and West agree on the concept of a good and wise God. Like any other Asians, however, the Vietnamese often raise an eyebrow when they are invited to meditate on the fall of Lucifer. To them it seems that, if God did not know that Lucifer, having received such power from Him, was going to rebel, He lacked wisdom. If God knew, He lacked goodness since it was He who created the latter. In the Asian context, anyone lacking wisdom and goodness cannot be called the Master of Heaven. Moreover, the Vietnamese may view the Christian God as the God who has no pity, because this God sent Lucifer to hell and kept him there eternally after he had fallen. Buddhism, on the contrary, “shows true compassion because it seeks to save even the worst criminals.”

Another issue concerning the relationship between the Divine and human beings is a question about how people are saved. Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism never discuss this question directly. They only imply in their teachings an agreement on the existence of the Ultimate Being who creates and governs all things. They also implicitly acknowledge the universal presence of the saving power of God in and through His benevolent Spirit.

Ignatian spirituality is not blind to the universal presence of the Holy Spirit, who in His power can transform and save the human race even if the saved do not know it. This

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8 Sp.Ex. #50.
9 Jacque Gernet, China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 235–236. Of course, Christians may go to great lengths to explain the wisdom and goodness of God in the gift of freedom that allows creatures to accept or reject Him. For example, in his On the Fall of the Devil, St. Anselm tries to elucidate the significance of this gift of freedom which allows the devil even to disobey God. They can also explain that God saves the world through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and that those who believe in Him will never be put to shame (Romans 10:11). Such explanations do not necessarily satisfy non-Christian Asian skeptics. The question about the problem of evil remains. Should one ignore the Asian/Vietnamese doubts and view them as barbarous and faithless? Alternatively, should one continue to discern, not so much the “what”, but the “how” of presenting the story of Lucifer or the Gospel? How does one present Christian concepts to others without making them appear abstract or at times contradictory?
spirituality, however, always places Christ at the center of everything, and thus it insists on the inseparability between the presence of the Spirit and the universal salvation of Christ. Hence, it challenges Vietnamese culture not to use this divine presence as an excuse for failing to explicitly proclaim Christ as the one and only Savior. The Vietnamese may not necessarily respond to this challenge by simply accepting it and professing that salvation can only come from Christ. Nevertheless, such a challenge will invite them to step outside their mysticism-oriented comfort zone and begin to reflect on the question: Is Jesus Christ truly the only Savior; and if He is not, who else can save them and how? In doing so, they genuinely enter into dialogue with Christianity to understand their dialogue partners’ position, and they also strengthen their own belief by focusing not on human understanding and concepts alone, but on the activity of the Divine. They then will have a better understanding of the way God saves the world, and they will develop a deeper sense of appreciation and love for Him.

2. Contributions and challenges through the methods used by each side

One of the commonalities that both Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture share is an emphasis on wholeness. The “First Principle and Foundation” in the Spiritual Exercises flows naturally out of this vision: every part must be open, ready, and attentive to the whole. The idea that all things in the universe are interrelated and that the particular cannot exist or have any meaning without the whole also appears in all Vietnamese faith traditions. According to Buddhism, nothing can be by itself alone, and thus everything in the cosmos must “inter-be” with everything else. This is why Mahayana Buddhism advocates the concept of universal compassion (thế giới đại đồng) to the extent that it teaches people not to

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10 Sp.Ex. #23.
hurt anyone or anything, even a tiny creature. Likewise, Confucianism and Taoism uphold the value of inter-relatedness. They exhort everyone to treat everyone else as siblings in a big family (tiếng gai huynh đệ). Therefore, openness and readiness in relation to the whole is not a foreign idea to Vietnamese culture. People on both sides can use this idea as common ground for discussion, and for identifying the shadows that may lurk on either side.

2.1. Challenges and contributions of Vietnamese culture to Ignatian spirituality through the “both-and” approach

The Vietnamese endorse the value of interrelatedness. Yet they do not hold the view that people can maintain this interrelationship by creating a one-size-fits-all formula. Hence, instead of trying to diminish the differences between peoples or impose certain concepts so as to maintain uniformity, they encourage each other to focus on the harmony and complementarity between things by embracing the “both-and” approach. In doing so, they allow the two halves to be different, and at the same time they recognize opportunities behind dissimilarities. This way of proceeding can be a challenge for the engagement between Vietnamese culture and Ignatian spirituality.

Indeed, unlike the Vietnamese, most Jesuit missionaries who worked in Vietnam used the “either-or” method. This method led them to the belief that they had the whole truth, and everything else was either wrong or irrelevant. It also directed them toward the idea of a Christian community more than toward the community itself. Consequently, they tended to

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12 This concept even penetrates into Vietnamese sayings and folk songs: “Bầu ơi thương láy bì cùng, tuy rằng khác giống nhưng chung một gian” (oh gourd, love the pumpkin; though of different species, you share the same trellis), or “một cây làm chẳng nên non, ba cây chuyền lại nên hòn núi cao” (one person cannot do much, but together they can build a mountain).

13 An attitude such as “the Church has nothing to get, nothing to learn; it can only give” is an attitude that is quite common among Christian missionaries. As a result, the interaction between these missionaries and other cultures will be all about one side preaching the truth to the other. See Michael Amaladoss, S.J., “Ecclesia in Asia: An Asian Document?” The Future of the Asian Churches, James Kroeger and Peter Phan (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2002), 116–117.
live in an abstract world that threatened to damage that community, no matter how well-intentioned the missionaries might be. Recognizing this potential danger, Vietnamese culture challenges Christianity in general, and Ignatian spirituality in particular, to look beyond the “more and less” and the “is and is not,” so that they can be enriched and have a deeper understanding of themselves and others. Thích Nhất Hạnh offers an observation concerning this topic:

When we extinguish our ideas as more and less, is and is not, we attain the extinction of ideas and notions, which in Buddhism is called nirvana. The ultimate dimension of reality has nothing to do with concepts. It is not just an absolute reality that can be talked about. Nothing can be conceived or talked about. Take, for instance, a glass of apple juice. You cannot talk about apple juice to someone who has never tasted it. No matter what you say, the other person will not have the true experience of apple juice. The only way is to drink it. It is like a turtle telling a fish about life on dry land. You cannot describe dry land to a fish. He could never understand how one might be able to breathe without water. Things cannot be described by concepts and words. They can only be encountered by direct experience.¹⁴

Vietnamese culture also challenges other sides not to take lightly the so-called theology of change, which is both creativity and responsiveness. In fact, “change is the matrix of all that was, is, and shall be and is the ground of all being and becoming.”¹⁵ It is this change that helps people to have a rich sense of the inner coherence and the beauty of what they believe in on the one hand, and on the other hand be willing to enrich it by means of insights learned from others. It helps people “to focus on complementarity, harmony and ballast rather than arguments and absoluteness.”¹⁶ It reminds people that an overemphasis on rationality and distinction may become a stumbling block preventing them from accepting reality, which constantly warns people that life and what is beyond it is a mystery that no one

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¹⁴ Thích N. Hạnh, Living Buddha, Living Christ, 140.
¹⁶ The Venerable Yifa often warns people that the truths that they hold dear are sometimes illusory. “They are projections of their anxieties, needs, and desires onto others, and not a reflection of reality.” See Venerable Yifa, Discernment: Educating the Mind and Spirit (New York: Lantern Books, 2009), 26.
except God can know with absolute certainty. Hence, they must reject the know-all attitude and be open to truths that they may encounter even in religions that are very different from their own.

Because of the “both-and” approach, Vietnamese culture emphasizes the connection between body and mind. It reminds those who embrace the Ignatian way of meditating (e.g., using imagination and the senses), for example, that their meditation may not bear much fruit until their deeper, ordinarily dormant, inner forces are awakened and integrated. Unlike the Christian philosophy, which views God as the unchanging entity, the Buddhist philosophy views God as the ever-changing reality. Because of this, Buddhism asserts that people can only experience God through participation. Hence, it invites people to pay more attention to breathing, sitting, and being mindful of the presence of this ever-changing reality rather than focusing solely on reason, concept, thought or imagination. In doing so, people will encounter an immanent God rather than an abstract and a remote one in their meditations.

To a certain extent, the Vietnamese prioritize experience over conceptualization. Thus they often wonder why Christianity in general and Ignatian spirituality in particular is so

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17 Asian philosophy in general and Vietnamese philosophy in particular invite people to see “the big picture.” To them it seems that, when people try to analyze differences or claim that they have superior analyses, they fail to recognize that even such distinctions are only relative. Fung Yu-lan elaborates this point in one of his books: “To make a distinction is to make some construction. However, construction is the same as destruction. For things as a whole, there is neither construction nor destruction, but they turn to unity and become one. For example, when a table is made out of wood, from the viewpoint of that table, this is an act of construction. But from the viewpoint of the wood or the tree, it is one of destruction. Such construction or destruction are so, however, only from a finite point of view. From the viewpoint of the Tao, there is neither construction nor destruction. These distinctions are all relative.” See Fung Yu-Lan, A Short History of Chinese Philosophy (New York: Free Press, 1976), 113.

18 Gideon Goosen has a great line in his Hyphenated Christian: “The Buddhist teaching raises the point that no one, in fact, knows what happens after death. Christians believe certain things about what happens after death, but no one has empirical knowledge. All is belief and much speculation.” This observation once more invites us to take a more humble approach and challenges us to admit that we do not know as much as we think we do. See Gideon Goosen, Hyphenated Christian (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 55.

19 Ước Nguyễn, Đại Cương Triết Học Đông Phương (An Overview of Eastern Philosophy) (Hà Nội: NXB Tri Thức, 2009), 156. Nhất Hạnh also insists that when people touch a thing with deep awareness, they touch everything: the present, past, future and even other dimensions. See Thích Nhất Hạnh, Living Buddha, Living Christ, 153.
rigid in its “either-or” tendency, especially when it comes to issues related to doctrinal formulations.\(^\text{20}\) In his *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, Thích Nhất Hạnh asserts:

> In Buddhist circles, we are careful to avoid getting stuck in concepts, even the concepts “Buddhism” and “Buddha.” If you think of the Buddha as someone separate from the rest of the world, you will never recognize a Buddha even if you see him on the street. That is why one Zen Master said to his student, “When you meet the Buddha, kill him!” He meant that the student should kill the Buddha concept in order for him to experience the real Buddha directly.\(^\text{21}\)

Ovey Mohammed reaffirms Nhất Hạnh’s point with this observation:

> From the Buddhist perspective, creeds and dogmas are not of paramount importance. They are useful tools, like rafts, helpful for crossing a stream, but of no further value once the other side has been reached. To insist on orthodoxy is to blur the fact that true religion originates from deep personal experience and not from the affirmation of propositions. Orthodoxy can be a crutch for people’s insecurity and anxiety, rather than help toward a spiritual growth and freedom. It places them under the whips of conformity so that only a few dare the perilous task of a genuine quest.\(^\text{22}\)

Undeniably, when one lets oneself get caught up in concepts, one tends to embrace rigidity and absoluteness. The example of de Rhodes’ making monogamy a non-negotiable condition for baptism reveals this rigidity. Perhaps in de Rhodes’ point of view (as well as that of other Western missionaries), polygamy arises from male lust and exploitation of women, and hence it is not compatible with Christian views of purity. While this sometimes

\(^{20}\) Unlike Christian theology, which has often been shaped by metaphysics, Buddhism does not pay much attention to metaphysical theories. On the one hand, Buddhism does not discourage people from struggling with metaphysical questions. On the other hand, Buddha himself thinks that those questions do not tend toward religious edification. He says: “Religious life does not depend on the dogma that the world is eternal; nor does it depend on the dogma that the world is not eternal. Whether the dogma obtains, there still remain birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair.” Buddha explains that he does not engage much with metaphysical issues because they do not profit or have anything to do with the fundamentals of religion, and they do not help people to achieve Nirvana. See *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha: Early Discourses, the Dhammapada, and Later Basic Writings*, ed. E. A. Burtt (New York: New American Library, 1955), 35–36.

\(^{21}\) Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 149.

happens, the root of the practice in Vietnam during the sixteenth and seventeenth century was primarily in the political, social, and economic domains. Nonetheless, the “either-or” mindset prevented the missionaries from bringing all of these factors into consideration, and hence they focused solely on the ethical/moral matter instead.

2.2. Challenges and contributions of Ignatian spirituality to Vietnamese culture through the “either-or” method

Of course, one does not need to rationalize everything and embrace one’s reason alone as if it will provide all answers. Yet one has to be aware of the fact that one needs reason as a check. When one is inspired by an inner voice (yin) or an experience, one must seek the counsel of one’s reason, which is the yang to test its authenticity. As William Johnson points out in Being in Love, “silence needs words; darkness needs light; negation needs affirmation; unknowing needs knowing; intuition needs reason; mysticism needs theology; timelessness needs time; non-objective prayer needs objective prayer; existence needs essence; the feminine needs the masculine; and yin needs yang.”

In a mutually enriching dialogue, Ignatian spirituality will not dismiss the insights that Vietnamese culture brings to the table, because it understands that the “both-and” approach can be as good as the “either-or” one. Likewise, it can equally be negative, especially when people fail to search for equilibrium. The concept of yin and yang and the exhortation toward harmony between things requires this balance. Ignatian spirituality

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23 For instance, the emphasis on having a son who would carry on the family legacy and venerate his ancestors led those who had no son to marry further women so that they would not be seen as filially impious. Many times the process of searching for concubines was initiated by the first wife herself. Moreover, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there was a civil war between Cochinchina and Tonkin. The need for more manpower led the leaders of both sides to encourage polygamy. In fact, there were more women than men because female infants survived in greater numbers than did males, and the civil war further diminished the male population. Thus, polygamous marriage provided a chance for those who had no husbands to join a family and enjoy social security.

challenges the Vietnamese to begin with their own concept of harmony and to recognize that experience alone may lead people to delusions if they do not use their reason to test its validity. In fact, in all the meditations of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius advises people to bring both heart and mind into consideration. The suggestion to set a composition of place at the beginning of each meditation leaves room for people to use their experiences so that their prayer is not simply an exercise of the mind.

Note that by letting people bring both mind and heart into consideration, Ignatius does not suggest that they should solely focus on practical realism. On the contrary, he understands that many substantial problems of the apostolate cannot be resolved without recourse to theological reflection. Pedro Arrupe elaborates this point by saying:

> For either they are theological problems properly so-called, or they are human problems, which must be considered in the light of faith, because the adequate answer to them can only be found in the supernatural order. Thus, on the one hand, we are called upon to be very practical, very realistic, because these problems are real problems; but on the other hand, we must have a capacity for abstracting the essential from the contingent. By thus detaching ourselves from the casuistry of the particular, we shall be better able to seek and find solutions of a more profound and permanent kind, since it is only through such a process of reflection that these problems can be seen extensively and in depth.\(^{25}\)

Once again, Arrupe’s suggestion reaffirms the need to seek a balanced position. This equilibrium will not allow one to embrace one view at the expense of the other. Rather, it encourages one to be open and to reflect on the insights offered by one’s dialogue partners.

For example, Buddhism often teaches people to pay attention to their core experience, which lends itself to being classified as *gnosis* or *liberating knowledge*. It advises people to acknowledge that life is full of suffering (which is caused by desires) and that one needs to put an end to it by getting rid of one’s desires with the assistance of the Eightfold Path. This liberating knowledge, Buddhism insists, will bring salvific value to the human race. Ignatian

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spirituality, on the one hand, does not reject the value of Buddhist gnosis. On the other hand, it challenges the other side to reflect on salvific experience through the lens of agape or redemptive love. It also suggests that people can have a better understanding of this love through meditations on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It is through this love that people are saved and can transcend themselves.

It seems that both sides challenge each other not to embrace only one way of viewing. For indeed, the core experience of Christianity is not agape pure and simple, but “agape in dialogue with gnosis”; and the core experience of Buddhism is not mere gnosis, but “a gnosis intrinsically in dialogue with agape.”26 In fact, as Aloysius Pieris insists, neither liberating knowledge nor redemptive love alone can fully express the mystery of God’s salvation:

What must be borne in mind is that both gnosis and agape are necessary precisely because each in itself is inadequate as a medium, not only for experiencing but also for expressing our intimate moments with the Ultimate Source of Liberation. They are, in other words, complementary idioms that need each other to mediate the self-transcending experience called salvation.27

Buddha also told his disciples not to accept anything simply because he had said it, but to be mindful and to verify it for themselves.28 Again, one can see an emphasis on experience, verification, and awareness in this advice. Such counsel challenges people not to rely too much on doctrinal formulations or believe in certain things just because the doctrines say so.

Ignatius, however, never advises people to embrace doctrines as if they are the end in themselves. He even upholds the value of personal experience, and he instructs spiritual

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27 Aloysius Pieris, S.J., Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 111. According to Pieris, the first major obstacle to a heart-to-heart dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity is “the failure on the part of Buddhists and Christians to acknowledge the reciprocity of these two idioms; their refusal to admit that the gnosis and agape are both legitimate languages of the human spirit or (as far as the Christian partner of dialogue is concerned) that they are languages that the same divine spirit speaks alternately in each one of us.”
directors to let God speak directly to their directees and not to stand in the way or let anything interfere with the process. Yet he also suggests that personal experience is not enough and that the process of verification can only be fruitful if one is open to the counsel of God’s spirit as well as of one’s spiritual companion. Thus, Ignatius proposes numerous resources, such as the examination of conscience, various meditations, methods of praying vocally and mentally, and guidelines for performing social actions. He invites people to use these resources so that they can be in touch with their experiences on the one hand, and, on the other hand, enter into a direct conversation with the Lord.

Granted, because of the influence of their Western ways of thinking and acting, some Jesuit missionaries have a tendency to use the “either-or” method. As a result, they face a constant challenge from their Vietnamese dialogue partners to balance it out with the “both-and” approach. In the Spiritual Exercises, however, the “either-or” method is not a predominant emphasis. On the contrary, the great characteristic of Ignatian spirituality is not the disjointed “or” but the integrated “and”:

Ignatian mysticism does not set realities against one another: action or contemplation, faith or justice, poverty or utility, trust or caution, obedience or freedom, but rather understands that these cross-fertilize one another. It is not simply about an “and” which joins, but one that integrates: it is not action juxtaposed with contemplation, but contemplation in action and action in contemplation; faith in justice and justice in faith. Such an interpenetration of all things proceeds from the Trinitarian perichoresis: the Father in the Son, the Son in the Father, and the constant flow of the Spirit. People can also find this interrelationship of reality as one of the most specific characteristics of Buddhism, which Nhất Hạnh calls inter-being (the interdependence of all things).

Of course, there is nothing wrong with embracing the “both-and” approach. Yet it would be a mistake to hold the view that one can undiscernibly incorporate everything into one’s own belief. Michael Amaladoss cautions people that if they let the “both-and” method

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29 Sp.Ex. #15.
lead them to the point of allowing a free combination of heterogeneous elements, they will face a situation in which they can no longer identify the boundaries between them. At that point, their identity will be at stake.\textsuperscript{31} This also is a challenge that Ignatian spiritually brings to Vietnamese culture. The concepts of faith and action, obedience and freedom, trust and caution, or self and others in the \textit{Spiritual Exercises} never aim at confusing the boundaries between them.

In summary, it seems that the methods on both sides not only challenge but also complement each other. On the one hand, with the assistance of Christian metaphysics and theological reflection, one can have more knowledge of what it is that one believes so as to commit fully to one’s faith. On the other hand, faith requires more than just understanding. It requires conversion, a change of heart. The invitation to experience, celebrate, and live the faith in daily experience as emphasized in Vietnamese culture helps one to be in touch with the “how” question: how does one make sense of all abstract concepts and live them fully in one’s life?\textsuperscript{32}

Likewise, the “either-or” approach indirectly reminds people that human beings are, by nature, transcendent and that each person has the responsibility to realize this nature.\textsuperscript{33}

Only when a person understands this task can he or she freely exercise his or her native

\textsuperscript{31} Michael Amaladoss stresses the importance of religious differences in his \textit{Walking Together}: “Two people may love the same person. Both may share experiences and understand what love is. But this encounter does not make their relationships the same or interchangeable. It is not proper to reduce religious differences by making them merely symbols of one and the same Absolute. Jesus and Krisna may be mediations to a Christian and a Hindu respectively to experience the mystery of God. But it does not mean that Jesus and Krishna are the same or that the differences between them are not important or that they are fundamentally equal.” See \textit{Walking Together: The Practice of Inter-Religious Dialogue} (Gamdi-Anand: Anand Press, 1992), 58.

\textsuperscript{32} This question is shared by many other Asians. One of the Emperors of China, Kangxi, once asked the Jesuit missionaries this question: “Is it possible that you should be always preoccupied with a world, which you have not yet reached, and count for nothing the one in which you live at present?” Such a question reminds us that although Asian people do not dismiss the importance of a life after death, they believe that no one should focus on that life to the extent of treating the present one as if it means nothing or does not exist. See Jacques Gernet, \textit{China and the Christian Impact}, 72.

transcendence towards the Absolute Being and take his or her dignity, value, and rights seriously (rather than passively surrender them to those of the community). In turn, the “both-and” method encourages people not to forget the need for retrieving togetherness, interdependence, and symbiosis. This “both-and” method helps people understand that personal autonomy is important in their search for what is true and right. Nonetheless, personal autonomy has nothing to do with self-sufficiency. Thus, each person must go beyond the limits of his or her own self and cooperate with the entire community.\(^{34}\) Without a doubt, if one is not willing to go beyond oneself, one will let one’s ego take the lead. This ego, as Tara Brach correctly warns, can convert anything to its own use, even spirituality.\(^{35}\)

3. **Contributions and challenges through the concepts of harmony, inner peace, detachment, and indifference**

3.1. **Harmony and inner peace**

The Vietnamese take pride in their culture and religious traditions. They hold dear the values of detachment, non-violence, simplicity, harmony, and discipline. Most often, these values are the lodestars guiding their process of discernment and obedience.\(^{36}\) Like other Asians, the Vietnamese are also well known for their spirit of religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence. Pope John Paul II confirms this reality in one of his post-synodal apostolic exhortations: “Without denying the existence of bitter tensions and violent conflicts, it can still be said that these people have often demonstrated a remarkable capacity for accommodation and a natural openness to the mutual enrichment of people in the midst of


\(^{36}\) For information on how the Vietnamese people use these values to discern, see Chapter 4, pp. 124–127.
the plurality of religions and cultures.”

All this happens because Asians in general, and the Vietnamese in particular place harmony at the center of their lives.

Note that in Vietnam, harmony is not a matter of simply living in peace, but a creative and dynamic force in relationships. It is not, as Peter Phan insists, “a matter of adding indefinitely to what one already has, but placing one’s goods and talents at the service of others so as to make up for what is lacking in one another, all in order to reach a perfect proportion.” This proportionality is operative primarily in the person in the family, then in society and its institutions, and finally in relation to the world.

Such a concept of harmony will resonate in the Christian proclamation of the Kingdom of God, in which God invites sinners to reconcile themselves with Him, with other human beings, and with the whole creation. Even from the first few meditations in the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius invites the retreatants to focus not on themselves but God, His love, and mercy. For instance, the meditations on the sins of the angels, of Adam and Eve, of the world, or of each individual seem on the surface to make people reflect on mistakes made by the creatures. At a deeper level, however, these meditations help people to understand that despite their sinful nature, God forever loves them and desires them to restore a harmonious relationship with God and the world through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. This loving relationship with God will restore the world’s harmony and beauty.

The idea that life can be made beautiful by and through a harmonious relationship with God and others also exists in Vietnam. According to Tuân Lý, a Vietnamese philosopher, if people want to live out this spirit of harmony, they must develop four

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relationships: (1) between God and themselves so that they can enter directly into the Way of the Tao, live according to God’s will, and thereby shorten the distance between Heaven and Earth; (2) between their body and soul so that they can return to their trung cung (the center of their being), live in a state of an thọ (inner peace), and thereby rediscover happiness and tranquility; (3) between themselves and others so that they are not a plague or nuisance to others and vice versa; and (4) between themselves and the surrounding nature so that Heaven can cover, Earth can protect, and Humans themselves can harmonize everything without distorting the will of God or destroying the beauty of the world. This way of living not only helps the Vietnamese but also challenges outsiders to recognize the wholeness and interrelatedness between God, the world, and humanity (Thiên–Địa–Nhân).

In its turn, Ignatian spirituality reminds people that when this interrelatedness and wholeness are broken, the world falls into chaos and darkness; sins take control of human actions; and humanity and nature are not in accord. The description of how chaotic the world is due to sins, or how nature protests against the human action of killing the only Son of God (e.g., the sun was darkened, the tombs were opened, and the temple’s veil was torn from top to bottom), appears explicitly in the Spiritual Exercises. Thus, this spirituality may agree with Lý’s suggestion that we must develop these relationships so as to live out the spirit of harmony. The issue, however, is that in Vietnam harmony is the measure of all things to the extent that people embrace an excessive politeness, which often lead them to view the truth not as “what is correspondent to facts” but as “that which promotes harmony.”

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41 See Sp.Ex. #47, 50, 51, 66–70, 106, or 297.
42 Within Vietnamese circles, no one will blame others if the others’ politeness is excessive. Moreover, a polite attitude is viewed as much more important than candor, direct speech, and critical analysis. Harmony in this context often becomes more than a set of relationships but an end in itself. See Ralph R. Covell, Confucius, The Buddha, and Christ (New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 11.
the name of politeness, saving face, and harmony, people avoid challenging what they consider to be negative for the community.

Ignatian spirituality will call into question this attitude. Of course, Ignatian spirituality will not promote an aggressive way of correcting a negative practice in a culture or a person, such as embarrassing him or her or threatening the communal harmony. Hence, it advises people to put the best interpretation on the other person’s action rather than to condemn it. Yet this spirituality challenges the Vietnamese culture not to turn its eyes away from a particular issue or treat it as if it did not exist. Certainly, trying to clean a house by sweeping the dust under a doormat will never work.

Although Ignatian spirituality also values harmony and peace within the community, one should not forget that this spirituality is, as William Barry points out, a spirituality of tensions. People can feel this tension when they compare their own desire to that of God or others. They can also experience it when they reflect upon the magis, the better option. These tensions, at times, may put the communal harmony and peace to a test. They may also lead community members to confusion, disappointment, or even despair. The Vietnamese view of the principle of harmony and the “both-and” approach may contribute helpfully in this circumstance. For if people view the spirituality of tensions through the Vietnamese lens, they will realize that such tensions do not necessarily destroy harmony but enhance it and help them to grow.

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43 Sp.Ex. #22.
45 As was already mentioned in the second chapter, under the principle of harmony and with the assistance of the both-and approach, people with differences and tensions do not have to deny an option to accept another option. Though differences may lead to contradictions, they do not mean that people cannot coexist in harmony, for these contradictions do not necessarily antagonize each other. Rather, they may supplement and support each other. The existence of one element depends on and is a condition for the existence of another. For instance, darkness is a condition of light; static is a condition of dynamic; and badness
3.2. Detachment and indifference

True harmony and true peace must be accompanied by letting go. The purpose of detachment in Taoism or Buddhism is to reach a state of total freedom, enlightenment, and peace. These traditions remind people that the root of all problems is attachment. The problem of attachment, however, is not the things to which one is attached, but rather, the person who attaches to things. Such an attachment is a manifestation of self-will, self-love, and self-interest, and hence when a person does not know how to control such inclinations, his or her attachment becomes a disorder.

Given this understanding, although Vietnamese culture does not look down on things themselves, it challenges people to learn how to use them appropriately (Confucianism) and view them through to the perspective of the Tao (Taoism). It encourages people to recognize that if they do not follow the Eightfold Path, they may fall into the trap of attaching themselves to those things and seeing them as the end goal, thus bringing suffering on themselves (Buddhism). In short, this culture frequently reminds people of the need to remove this disordered attachment.

Ignatian spirituality also agrees about the need of removing this disordered attachment. This is shown in the progression that Ignatius points to in the contemplation on the “Two Standards.” From attachment to richness and honors, one moves to self-love and pride. One then acquires an attitude of self-love and self-sufficiency, which in turn cause one to cling to the things that one possesses. Such an attachment can be so disordered that it leads to grave sins, including idolatry, envy, backbiting.\textsuperscript{46} To rid oneself of this attachment,

\textsuperscript{46} Sp. Ex. #136–148.
Michael Amaladoss suggests, one must be ready for “self-giving and humility.”\(^4^7\) Thus, unlike the approach that the Vietnamese Buddhists often take (i.e., seeing the desire to have things as negative and as the source of all suffering, although this is not what Buddhism truly teaches), Ignatian spirituality promotes a spirit of indifference, which implies flexibility. The phrase “we should not prefer health rather than sickness, wealth rather than poverty, honor rather than dishonor, and a long life rather than a short one” in the “Principle and Foundation”\(^4^8\) is quite significant because it reflects a spirit of seeing things through God’s lens, taking only what helps one to fulfill His will, and using it appropriately.

Concerning detachment and indifference, it appears that both sides share the same view, and often complement each other. Vietnamese culture places an emphasis on suffering as the consequence of disordered attachment, and it invites people to reflect on what they can do to detach themselves from what is not helpful. Ignatian spirituality, in turn, focuses on self-giving and humility, which are based on a deep love that extends from God to all His creatures. In doing so, it reminds people that perfect detachment and indifference are not rooted in human efforts of self-cultivation as is suggested in Vietnamese culture. Rather, it is rooted in a deep sense of longing for the Divine, surrendering to His will, and trusting in His love and providence. People can learn how to perform these actions well by imitating the way Jesus did so: surrendering to, trusting in, and loving the Father.

4. **Seeking a healthier engagement and a mutually enriched dialogue between Ignatian spirituality and the culture of Vietnam**

All of what has been presented thus far reveals the fact that, although Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture are not always on the same page, they can use their


\(^{48}\) *Sp.Ex.* #23.
differences to reciprocally challenge, complement, and transform each other. These challenges and contributions certainly help both sides to improve their dialogue with one another. The remaining question asks how Ignatian spirituality can inculturate into Vietnamese culture so that the Vietnamese can discern and obey according to the Ignatian tradition without the need of becoming Westerners in their own setting. To answer this question, it may be helpful to examine Lao Tzu’s Water Path model.

4.1. **Lao Tzu’s Water Path model**

Flexibility, simplicity, and non-action are the three important features in Taoism. Concerning these features, Lao Tzu asserts that we can compare them to nothing more appropriate than water:

The highest good is like water. Water brings life to ten thousand things, bringing nourishment without striving. It seeks out the lowest levels to settle, places that people avoid and despise. This is like the Tao; water is in accordance with nature. The Sage is like water, living his life in accordance with nature, going with the flow of life. The Sage seeks humble refuge, in meditation staying true without desire. He is thoughtful in his relations with his fellow man, keeping an open heart. The Sage is gentle in his nature, standing by his word and actions, sincerity and honesty precede him in his travels and dealings. Always governing with equality, being timely and competent in his endeavors, staying in balance and harmony with nature, the Sage lives the way of the Tao.\(^{49}\)

Likewise, in verse 78 of his *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu points out:

There is nothing in the world that is weaker or softer than water, and yet there is nothing better for attacking hard and strong things. There isn’t anything better or more effective than water to create change. It is the weakness that gives water its strength. The soft can overcome the hard; the gentle can overcome the harsh. While men know this law, very few practice it. Therefore, the Sage says: Only the one that can carry the burden of men, to take their shame upon himself is worthy to lead his fellow countrymen. Living in serenity among the sorrow, free from the evil that abounds, only he can lead the people in a just manner. The truth often seems paradoxical.\(^{50}\)

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\(^{49}\) Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, 54.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 175.
Indeed, water appears to be extremely flexible, and at times, weak. Everything can press upon it, and more often than not, water will step back and leave room for the others. Yet nothing can break it apart or take away its core existence. Its flexibility allows water to preserve its energy, and it uses what it absorbs from the surrounding environment to form a power that is much stronger than itself. Moreover, despite its usefulness, water has never sought for recognition. It silently brings life and nourishment to all things. It often settles at the lowest levels, which people usually avoid and despise. Water has never looked down on anything that wants to associate with it. Either the stinky mud, ugly rocks, beautiful sands, or gorgeous fishes—water is willing to intermingle with them all without losing its identity. Finally, water can exist in multiple forms: liquid, gas, or solid. Because of this variability, it will not stay rigidly in one state and often changes to fit different situations.

Based on Lao Tzu’s observations and the characteristics of water, Quý Hoàng suggests that the Water Path can be a new way of inculcating into the culture of Vietnam. It can be a tool assisting both Vietnamese culture and Ignatian spirituality to improve their dialogue with one another.\textsuperscript{51} To a certain extent, the Water Path can become a model helping the Vietnamese to discern and obey according to the Ignatian tradition in their own setting. Hoàng unfolds his recommendation by presenting the following points.

First, the concept of flexibility is quite similar to that of the Gospel. “Be wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove” (Matthew 10:16). “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). Undeniably, the Spirit of God is not too rigorous. He will not let Himself be bound by prejudices, rigidity, frameworks, or even

\textsuperscript{51} Quý S. Hoàng, S.J., \textit{Thần Học Thiêng Liêng} (Sacred Theology), 78–80.
principles. Being a Christian is being born of this Spirit. Ignatian spirituality upholds this idea because impartiality, flexibility, adaptability, and freedom are its crucial features. Thus, it appears that both sides can rely on the concept of flexibility to dialogue with one another.

Second, Christianity is only a minority religion in Vietnam. Surrounding it are many other faith traditions that have been rooted in the history of Vietnam for thousands of years. Interacting with them, and experiencing tensions with them, is unavoidable. To benefit from these engagements and tensions, people should enter into mutual relationships with others whose religions are different from their own, be willing to exchange gifts, and should use these gifts to enrich their faith as well as the faiths of others. Learning from the Water Path model, Hoàng suggests, Christianity in general and Ignatian spirituality in particular should seek the lowest place to settle. One should embrace humility while entering into a dialogue with others, treating them with great respect and avoiding imposing its ideas upon them.

Third, the Water Path model offers people a way of living: being flexible depends on the situation. One of the characteristics of water is that it is so flexible that one can neither imprison it in one’s hand nor tie it down. Moreover, despite the fact that water is present in all forms (solid, liquid, or gas), it has never changed or stopped being itself. Ignatian spirituality can imitate this manner of inculturating into Vietnamese culture. In doing so, it can be flexible enough to adapt to new situations without losing its core values, open enough to give and take gifts without reservation or judgment, and generous enough not to elevate means over ends.

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52 Note that flexibility, simplicity, and non-action in the Water Path model also require a letting go of prejudices, rigidity, frameworks, or even principles. It does not mean that one will not follow any path, use any framework, or accept any principle. Flexibility, simplicity, and non-action in Taoism mean to living one’s life in accordance with nature, going with the flow of life, and following the Way of the Tao. See Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching, 54ff.
53 Quý S. Hoàng, S.J., Thần Học Thiêng Liêng (Sacred Theology), 89.
54 Ibid., 90.
Finally, through the viewpoint of the *yin* and *yang*, the Water Path model teaches one how to live with contradictions without losing sight of the underlying complementarities. In its liquid form, for instance, water is soft. Yet its softness does not stop water from flowing around rocks and complementing the latter to form a fantastic view of a waterfall. In fact, without this complementarity, the waterfall ceases to exist. Based on observations such as this, the Vietnamese hold the view that each pole of the *yin-yang* circle cannot exist without the other. They also believe that although *yin* and *yang* appear to be contradictory at times, they always accompany and help each other to grow and maintain their uniqueness. Hoàng then suggests that if people view everything through this lens, they will accept and appreciate what they are not used to seeing, hearing, feeling or thinking.\(^\text{55}\) In doing so, people can take advantage of these new ideas so as to discover the place where old and new values meet, and discern whether such a place can be a good place for all to flourish.

The new way of inculturating into Vietnamese culture using the Water Path model can be summarized in three words: *thắp* (humility), *mềm* (flexibility), and *tùy* (adaptability). Ironically, these characteristics have been promoted all along by Christianity in general and Ignatian spirituality in particular. One can find these features mentioned explicitly or implicitly in the Holy Scriptures or the *Spiritual Exercises*.\(^\text{56}\) Thus, it seems that the concept of the Water Path is not foreign after all. Its effectiveness, however, depends on whether one allows oneself to be enlightened by the insights learned from other cultures, and to use their languages rather than one’s own. When one can do so, one will not lose one’s identity but enrich one’s faith with the gifts received from others.

\(^{55}\) Ibid., 92. Examples include hearing people use the word “*thờ*” (worship) in the cult of the ancestors (although what the Vietnamese truly mean is to “venerate” or to “show respect”), seeing them bow almost to the ground in front of the image of Confucius (although they have never equated him with God), or observing their *both-and* thinking in daily situations.

4.2. Ignatian discernment and obedience in the Vietnamese setting

A question one should ask at this point is whether this new way of inculturation helps one to discern and obey according to the Ignatian tradition in the Vietnamese setting and whether it helps to enrich the dialogue between Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture. To discern whether the Water Path model is profitable for the process of inculturation, and whether this model helps the Vietnamese discern and obey according to the Ignatian tradition in their own setting, one needs to recall the potential impediments to Ignatian discernment in the Vietnamese context. These impediments include coerciveness in developing a personal relationship with Christ through the act of accepting Him under the concept of “the only Savior,” the issue of desire, the invitation to be active in the search for God and His will, the tension between individualism and collectivism, and the problem of obedience. The previous chapter has already pointed out some opportunities underlying the impediments and the possibilities to overcome them. Thus, this sub-section will examine how people can realize these possibilities with the help of Lao Tzu’s model.

4.2.1. How does this model help one to develop a personal relationship with Christ?

It is very important to search for and embrace the truth. Yet given the characteristics of thấp (humility), mềm (flexibility), and tùy (adaptability) learned from the Water Path model, one should be humble enough to restrain oneself from making absolute claims and/or turning them into ideologies. One should be aware of the difference between the quest for

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57 See Chapter 4, pp. 139–146.
58 It is very important to search for and embrace the truth. Nonetheless, as Paul Knitter correctly points out, the truth sometimes can be dangerously distorted into ideology. The history of all religions and cultures is rife with examples. For instance, the Brahmans (religious authorities in Hinduism) insist that the caste system is eternal and that it is the sacred law of Dharma. They have tried to enforce it throughout the history of India, even though this ideology does nothing to improve the lives of the Indian people, except to secure the Brahmans’ power and prestige. See Paul F. Knitter, Introducing Theologies of Religions (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 12. The same phenomenon happens in Christianity. There was a time when the Catholic Church
truth and the quest for infallibility. One should realize that “nothing kills off religious development so quickly, and nothing is more anti life-giving than the conviction that one has it all, and no further ideas, intuitions or insights are necessary or possible.” Likewise, one should realize that it is not proper for a wise man who maintains the truth to come to the conclusion that “this alone is the truth, and everything else is false.”

Once this awareness and understanding take place, people may be willing to talk to others who use different telescopes to look at the universal truth and hear from them not only how their truths look to them but how their proclamation of truth affects them. If this occurs, those who embrace Ignatian spirituality, for example, will be patient enough to give their dialogue partners adequate time to develop personal relationships with Christ and discern for themselves whether He is their only Savior. The Vietnamese, in turn, will believed that there was no salvation outside the Church and that one would be eternally condemned if one had not been baptized. This belief dictated the way missionaries preached the Gospel. Francis Xavier, for example, told the Japanese that their ancestors were in hell because they had not received baptism, and thus he urged his hearers to convert to Catholicism before it was too late. Because of this, many Japanese walked away from Xavier. Many held the view that it was better for them to go to hell and be with their ancestors than to heaven without them. Their filial piety would not allow them to choose otherwise. See Sơn S. Hoàng, S.J., Đôi Nét Lịch Sử Dòng Tên (An Overview of the History of the Society of Jesus: Its Beginning and Development), 83ff.

The danger of ideology still exists in the world today. At a mass held at the Revolution Square in Havana (September 20, 2015), Pope Francis told the Cubans that love and service (not ideologies) were the keys to their happiness: “We do not serve ideas, we serve people.” See http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/leave-ideology-behind-and-care-for-the-human-person-pope-tells-un-42488. The Pope repeatedly reminds people that ideology and faith are incompatible. On September 25, 2015, Pope Francis told members of the United Nations that there should be no room for ideology in their agendas, and he stressed the need to go beyond policies to concrete solutions in caring for the poor and vulnerable. See http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/leave-ideology-behind-and-care-for-the-human-person-pope-tells-un-42488.

59 Gideon Goosen, Hyphenated Christian, 91.
60 Walpola Sri Walpola, What the Buddha Taught, 10.
61 The fact that people can use different telescopes to look at the same universal truth does not mean that one should abandon one’s own point of view in order to see things through a lens that is foreign to oneself. Rather, it means that one should not mistake the telescope for the viewed truth itself. One should not uphold one’s view of the truth at the cost of turning it into ideology. Conversely, to build a bridge that spans the longest distance between peoples, one must construct sturdy abutments in both cultures. Such bridges cannot be built from only one side of the chasm. See Paul F. Knitter, Introducing Theologies of Religions, 12.
62 Humility, flexibility and adaptability, as emphasized in the Water Path model, neither encourage relativism nor diminish the importance of searching for the ultimate truth. The Water Path model only reminds us of the fact that the very concept of truth is culturally conditioned. Indeed, as Gideon Goosen points out in Hyphenated Christian: “In the West, the Thomistic definition of truth as adaequatio intellectus et rei (the
imitate the way of the water, flowing around ideas that appear to be impossible to their own culture and adopting them into their own lives so that they can be enriched rather than impoverished by new concepts. Coerciveness then evaporates.

4.2.2. The Water Path model helps one to deal with the issue of desire

Buddhism and Taoism do not view all desires as equally negative. Rather, they advise people not to attach themselves to any disordered tendencies (Buddhism) but to follow the Way of the Tao (Taoism). The invitation to be in touch with one’s deepest desire in Ignatian spirituality is also the invitation to get rid of disordered tendencies so that one can be the person whom God creates one to be—a person who tries to search for God’s will and obey it.

If that is the case, then Lao Tzu’s idea seems to complement Ignatian spirituality. For indeed, his Water Path model reminds people that they should have a desire to live their life in accordance with nature, to go with the flow of life, and to follow the Way of the Tao. Such a desire, in turn, will lead them to follow the will of God. The model also reminds one to observe the way the water behaves: it always seeks the lowest place to settle and lives its own life for the benefit of others, yet it never lets itself be broken apart so as to lose its own identity. The Vietnamese can learn from this model and recognize the invitation to empty themselves for the benefit of others, and at the same time maintain their own well-being and dignity. With the help of this model, they recognize the beauty of the self-emptying Christ whose desire is to embrace and redeem all, even if it means living a humble life and dying a horrible death. They then will realize that the Ignatian invitation to be in touch with their desire is not as foreign and obstructive as they once thought.

correspondence of the real thing with what is in the mind) was prevalent for many centuries. In the East, the concept of truth was more subtle. It was the balanced harmony of mutually dependent forces or powers” (116).
4.2.3. *The Water Path model helps one to respond to the invitation to be active*

Certainly, passivity is considered a virtue in Vietnam. Thus, the advice to be active in the search for God and His will can become a problem. Yet passiveness does not mean doing nothing. Rather, it means paying attention to various ideas, respecting and taking them into consideration, pondering whether they are compatible with the flow of nature and whether they help the community to flourish, and doing what is guided by the Tao. Lao Tzu calls it “wu-wei” and insists that those who achieve this state have already done everything.\(^{63}\)

In this model, water behaves according to this concept. On the surface, it appears that water does not do much. The landscape of the earth will form its stream and the surrounding environment will dictate its direction or even its forms. In reality, water associates with and nurtures all things. It becomes active through an act of uniting action and non-action in the basis of passiveness.\(^{64}\) *Wu-wei* according to this model helps people return to their true nature, a state in which they realize that, despite their position as leaders or subjects, they are asked to live according to the *Way of the Tao*, discovering the will of God and following it. This is not different from the Ignatian idea to be active in the search for God and His will. The invitation to be active in such a process will no longer be an issue then.

4.2.4. *The Water Path model helps one to deal with the tension between individualism and collectivism*

Water is not much concerned about itself. It yields the way to others if need be. It makes no complaint about how often it has to satisfy the needs of others. Its focus is the

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\(^{63}\) Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, 126.

\(^{64}\) According to Trần Ngọc Thêm, cultural values always have an influence on the way people perceive and respond to the world. In Vietnam, these influences can go as far as requiring people to play an active role in being passive, insofar as they enter into a mutual relationship with surrounding factors and learn from them. In doing so, they become active on the basis of passivity. See Thêm N. Trần, *Tìm Về Bản Sắc Văn Hóa Việt Nam (Discovering the Identity of Vietnamese Culture)* (Hồ Chí Minh: NXB Tp. Hồ Chí Minh, 1996), 27ff.
wellbeing of the entire community, and in that sense it becomes a good example of
collectivism. Nonetheless, water forever is water. Nothing can take away its identity. The
communal emphasis is not a threat to its individuality, although tensions at times still exist.
In fact, there are times that it has to be contained in a narrow river rather than a large one.
There are also times the tension is so high that external factors restrain the mobility of water.
Even so, water turns into a solid form and remains itself.65

This way of being provides a good lesson for dealing with the tension between
individualism and collectivism. With its help, one can learn how to achieve the state of chung
yung or indifference, see the difference between the end and the means, and recognize the
beauty of God’s love and harmony in the midst of all things, even in difficulties. Once people
achieve this state, they will not view individualism and collectivism as an “all-or-nothing”
deal. Rather, they take these two tendencies as useful tools helping them to explicitly find
God in all things (as suggested by Ignatian spirituality) or implicitly enjoy God’s presence in
the form of communal harmony (as advised by Vietnamese culture). In other words, they
know how to turn the potential impediment of this tension into an opportunity.

4.2.5. The Water Path model helps one to deal with the problem of obedience itself

In the fourth chapter, this thesis pointed out the fact that, in Vietnam, the desire to
surrender one’s will to that of the superior often predetermines the outcome of one’s
discernment. Hence one often forces oneself to discern over and over again until the outcome
of one’s discernment is similar to that of the superior. If one cannot reach this conclusion,
one often chooses to keep the result to oneself rather than to share it with the superior. In

65 It appears that in the past few pages I speak of water as though it has human-like internal thoughts or
desires (e.g., it does not pay attention to itself, it focuses on the good of the community, etc.). In reality, all this
happens simply because of the relevant physical aspects of water. Hence, what I write here should only be read
metaphorically.
such a context, it appears difficult to discern according to the Ignatian tradition, a tradition that demands a spirit of trust and frank dialogue between the two parties.

The Water Path model helps one to overcome this barrier by bringing two things into focus. First, the characteristics of thấp (humility), mềm (flexibility), and tùy (adaptability) aim at ensuring a spirit of cooperation and harmony between all things, not at upholding personal ideas (even if the ideas belong to the superior). Such a goal helps water to overcome obstacles. For instance, a huge rock can prevent water from flowing in a straight-forward fashion, but the latter still finds its way to reach the other side by flowing underneath or around the former. Water knows the needs of many creatures waiting on the other side of the rock, and these needs are much more important than the will of the rock itself. Similarly, those who are frozen by a desire to do only what a superior wants should see a bigger picture: the focus should be the wellbeing of the whole community, not the leader himself.

Second, the relationship between water and other things is not the relationship between a winner and a loser but between those who determine to work with each other for the common good. Thus, at times, water is willing to take the lead, bringing with it other things such as fishes and alluvial soil. Other times, it becomes so passive that it lets other things direct its way. The main goal of this give-and-take is to achieve a spirit of cooperation and maintain a harmonious environment for all. Either when leading or led, water interacts with others not out of fear but respect and care. Thus, it will obey when needed and express its own opinion when necessary. The Vietnamese can learn from this lesson and thereby

66 I do not mean to suggest that the subordinates should work behind their superior’s back to get what they want. Rather, I mean to point out the importance of the communal need, which is so essential in Vietnamese culture. Again, the expression about the behavior of water should only be read metaphorically.

67 In fact, as asserted by Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, the former Superior General of the Society of Jesus, obedience aims not at the superior’s personal agenda, but the apostolic good: “It is best put as obedience to the Lord through the Superior, who is trying not to let his own ideas prevail, but the apostolic good.” See Men of God – Men for Other (New York: Alba House, 1990), 176.
understand that obedience does not equate to not sharing dissenting ideas. When this occurs, obedience will no longer dictate or threaten the authenticity of their discernment.

Certainly, the Water Path model sheds light on a new way of inculcating into other cultures. It also helps the Vietnamese realize the opportunities of overcoming potential impediments that prevent them from discerning according to the Ignatian tradition in their own context. It will be necessary then to wonder whether this model helps to enrich the dialogue between Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture.

4.3. **How does the Water Path model help to enrich the dialogue between Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture?**

The language of humility, flexibility and adaptability is the language that Ignatian spirituality values highly. Humility, for example, is one of the main themes of the *Spiritual Exercises*. In the meditation on the “Two Standards,” Ignatius suggests that because meekness is one of Christ’s virtues, those who want to follow Him must acquire it. He also uses other meditations to help people realize their humble position and sinful nature so that they can be open to learning from Christ and letting Him forgive, choose, and redeem them. In his letters as well as his *Spiritual Exercises* and *Constitutions*, Ignatius also upholds the value of flexibility and adaptability.

Given this phenomena, it is safe to propose that both Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture can use the elements thập (humility), mềm (flexibility), and tùy (adaptability) as a foundation for their dialogue. In fact, when they speak this common language, they will have a better chance of deepening their understanding of each other and at the same time seeking clarification and/or challenging each other without destroying

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69 *Sp.Ex.* #23, 45–61, 149–157, 275, etc.
70 For this point, see Chapter 1, pp. 29–32.
fragile relationships or turning their conversation into a monologue. With the lessons learned from the Water Path model, both sides can benefit from the following points.

First, if Christianity in general and Ignatian spirituality in particular want to inculturate into the Vietnamese setting, then, in the words of Michael Amaladoss, “it has to be a local entity, rooted in the realities of the situation and with a mission to proclaim [their] messages in that situation.”\footnote{The Asian bishops share the same view by asserting that “people cannot afford to remain alien in their own culture and country, interested in the salvation of themselves or their little group.” See Michael Amaladoss, Beyond Inculturation – Can the Many be One?, 11. Father Pedro Arrupe, the 28th General Superior of the Society of Jesus, also insists that “the Jesuit service to God, the Church, and the Supreme Pontiff demands adaptability, by which they adapt and incarnate themselves in the setting in which they labor and that this will demand of all a certain spiritual flexibility, enabling it to achieve that degree of liberty which recognizes and accepts the human values of the cultural context in which they live.” See Pedro Arrupe, A Planet to Heal, 219.} Certainly, water always works according to the realities of the situation. It flows slowly when the landscape is even and flat, yet fast or even aggressively when such a condition alters.

Second, the local people and the newcomers should be aware of the fact that, throughout the process of contextualization and inculturation, there is a risk that people may not enhance but compromise and betray the orthodoxy of their faith.\footnote{Thus, one must always struggle with the two questions proposed by Phan. First, must one abandon altogether the practice of one’s former religion when becoming a Christian (supposing that one was a devotee of such a religion), and if not, why not and to what purpose? Second, if one is already a Christian, is it theologically possible to adopt the beliefs and practices of other religions in one’s life? See Peter Phan, Being Religious Inter-religiously (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 61. A discernment process according to either the Ignatian tradition or the Vietnamese biến phân may become a useful tool in answering these questions.} The Water Path model never promotes this betrayal. Regardless of the situation, water always maintains its core identity and can do so by trying to understand the viewpoints of the things with which it comes into interaction and speaking their languages if necessary. People can learn from this model and avoid the risk of compromising and betraying the orthodoxy of their faith by entering into a process of dialoguing, comparing notes, and reflecting on the teachings and practices of other religions.
If such a process is authentic (e.g., free from arrogant attitudes, prejudices, or hidden agendas), “they will unburden themselves of misconceptions they have about other traditions, purify doctrinal claims by uncovering the cultural and philosophical accretions that inevitably surround truths held over a long period of time, and remain in living connection with the tradition and faith experience of particular communities.” They then will have a wider knowledge, be more tolerant and objective, be less rooted in personal and communal views, and yet remain committed to their tradition while learning from those of others. For indeed, the process of dialoguing, comparing notes, and reflecting on the teachings and practices of other faiths does not produce any new truth, but rather, “it only provides new insights helping one to have a better understanding of the existent truths.”

Third, inculturating Ignatian spirituality into Vietnamese culture does not mean that both now become one and the same thing. Rather, it means that they both enter into a process in which Ignatian spirituality and its messages can challenge and thereby transform Vietnamese culture from within, and the latter can likewise challenge and enrich the former so that the new values introduced by the former can be expressed in new ways of understanding and living. This process, however, will become useless if one tries to domesticate Ignatian spirituality so much that it can no longer be itself, or if its messages remain “so foreign and alienating that it is no longer relevant” in one’s life.

Note that in Lao Tzu’s model, water neither turns anything into itself nor lets itself be turned into the other. The virtues of humility, flexibility, and adaptability help water to

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74 Ibid., 112.
76 Michael Amaladoss, S.J., *Beyond Inculturation – Can the Many be One?*, 1. This is a point at which the Ignatian discernment process ensures that one will not fall into this trap. Ironically, even within the process of Ignatian discernment itself, one requires a certain dimension of inculturation. Otherwise, if the local people such as the Vietnamese are not able to discern well, the result may not be a positive one.
achieve enrichment and harmony rather than collapse all things into one. Both Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture can learn from this lesson so that they know how to speak the same language and associate with new cultures/traditions without losing their heritage. They can also know how to truly listen to what the other says, recognize the beauty of the other’s practice, be willing to view things through the other’s lens, and be ready to complement what is lacking in their dialogue partner.

All of what has been presented thus far suggests that the lessons learned from the Water Path model may play the role of a helpful tool, changing what appears to be impossible to an opportunity. It helps the Vietnamese to discern according to the Ignatian tradition in their own setting. It enriches the engagement between Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture. Finally, it helps people to realize that indeed, it is possible to have a

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77 As Peter Phan points out, speaking new languages or associating with new cultures or traditions and yet still longing for the same heritage and value is not a Tower of Babel but a new Pentecost. It is not an act of rejecting one culture at the expense of another or an act of embracing syncretism. Rather it is, to borrow words from Phan, the “hermeneutic reconstruction aiming at shaping, out of resources of the Vietnamese culture and that of the other, a new synthetic culture, a tertium quid.” See Peter Phan, *Christian with an Asian Face* (New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 17.

78 For instance, instead of filling one’s mind with thoughts and images during meditation, as one often does according to the Ignatian way, one may learn from the Asian forms of meditation, i.e., to leave room for silence and to listen, to think of nothing and simply immerse oneself in the mystery of God, and to create a complete inner quietness so that one can be in touch with one’s deep inner self. By using elements belonging to both Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture, one can see both sides of the coin. In other words, a healthy engagement between these two methods helps one to become a balanced, deeply reflective and richly spiritual being.

79 For example, although Buddhism promotes the concept of universal compassion, Christianity in general and Ignatian spirituality in particular can complement such a concept with the image of a God who loves all creatures even if it means dying for them. Meditations on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ in the *Spiritual Exercises* constantly remind people of the *agape* that God offers them. However, the focus on this *agape* at times overshadows the importance of friendship (*philia*), which is very important in Asia. According to Peter Phan, friendship in Asia is everything because in friendship there is a dimension of attraction, admiration, and pleasure. “Christians may become friends with non-Christians because of the beauty and value of their beliefs and practices. Initially, those friends are strangers. By accepting the strangers as friends, we allow their ‘otherness’ to confront us radically, challenging us with stories we have never heard, questions we have never raised, beliefs we have never entertained, and practices we have never imagined. By welcoming and learning to appreciate these new religious realities, we gradually adopt them as our own because our friends have them and share them with us, and thus we begin to acquire, perhaps without being aware of it, multiple religious belonging or double religious identity.” Peter Phan, *Being Religious Inter-religiously*, 81. Thus, the Vietnamese culture helps to remove the cloud that covers friendship, the importance of which Christianity never means to discount, although it may, at times, not pay enough attention to it.
mutually enriched dialogue between Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture, especially on the questions of discernment and obedience.
Conclusion

When a person comes to a new land, he or she can choose one of three options: first, be a guest and live his or her life according to the hospitality of the host; second, take over the land, impose his or her values upon it and turn it into a comfortable home for himself or herself; or third, integrate into the situation, become one of its members and work with all others to make it a better place to live. The first choice reminds one of the fact that one cannot be a guest forever. Sooner or later, one must decide to either become a permanent resident or leave. Furthermore, the hospitality of the host depends on the behavior of the guest. It will be generous and warm if the guest respects and is sensitive to the host’s values. It will be cold and inconsiderate if the guest appears to be disrespectful and unappreciative.

The second choice prompts one to think of the history of Vietnam during the colonial era—an era when the relationship between the French and the Vietnamese was built on the principle of power. The French, who were stronger, played the role of the oppressor and the Vietnamese, who were weaker, had no choice but to be the oppressed. Nevertheless, such a relationship did not last long. When the oppressed were strong enough, they rose up and chased the other away.

The last choice seems to be the best option, especially if the guest plans to stay there permanently. The question, however, is whether the host also blesses and agrees with the plan. More importantly, how are they going to carry out this proposal? Hidden behind these questions is the need for mutual respect and enriched dialogue between the two parties. When this respect and dialogue exist, the host and guest can come together to form a new family. They may do so out of a utilitarian motivation (“gộp giao thọi cơm chung” in Vietnamese). In that case, each party looks for points of contact so that they can have
something to stand on and from there build the relationship. Nonetheless, this motivation
does not always work. The marriage itself will be at stake when one side no longer gets
anything from the other. Moreover, as Michael Barnes correctly warns, “an effort of looking
simply for points of contact between the two often risks distorting or even damaging both.”¹

To develop a strong and healthy marriage, there must be a deeper reason for one
person to tie the knot with another. The two now become one, as is described in a
Vietnamese folk song “vợ chồng gũi xương gũi thịt cho nhau” (husband and wife become
bone and flesh of each other). Marriage, then, is not about getting what one needs but about
entering into a loving relationship in which both people are willing to respect, support, and
complement each other. In this loving relationship, each party will not treat the other as
unimportant, inferior, or even non-existent. Nor will they always argue to see who has better
ideas. They understand the importance of dialogue and of silently reverencing each other. For
indeed, “silence, when it is deep, can unite while words, at times, can impede
communication.”² Finally, both sides are willing to help each other to be strong because they
know that a good marriage can exist only between two strong and independent persons.

To a certain extent, one can say the same thing about the relationship between
Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture. If this relationship is to be helpful at all, it must
be treated as if both sides enter into a marital bond. This dissertation is an attempt to envision
such a bond. It gives readers a chance to look back, look at the present, and look toward the
future so that they can decide for themselves what should be done to improve and maintain a
healthy engagement between the two parties.

1. **Looking back: reflection on what the thesis has presented**

From the beginning, the thesis has asserted that it is possible to have a mutually enriched dialogue between Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture on the questions of discernment and obedience. Reviewing the historical context of Christianity in Vietnam, the thesis has acknowledged the reality that Christianity is still a minority; non-Christians still have reservations about it; and the Christian Church still faces many stumbling blocks. This indicates that people of both sides should not take their relationship for granted, and they should work harder to improve it.

There is no doubt that Ignatian spirituality influences and is influenced by the cultures with which it interacts. Hence, it is reasonable for this spirituality to inculturate into these cultures so as to develop a life-giving relationship for both. The thesis has suggested that such inculturation requires a willingness to enter into a reciprocal process where both parties have a chance to interact, challenge, and enrich each other. It requires an openness to adopt some local traditions and yet not lose its own strength and authenticity (or threaten the strength and authenticity of the other). It also involves a readiness to use a lens or language that appears to be totally foreign to its original form. More importantly, inculturation should not be seen as a strictly modern phenomenon. On the contrary, this dissertation has presented evidence to prove that this practice has its roots in the earliest days of the history of the Christian Church, as well as in the desire for adaptation that inspired Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus.³

In the first chapter, this thesis has given readers a vivid overview of Ignatius’ life, and thereby provides a better understanding of the foundation of the Society of Jesus, and the

³ For this point, see Chapter 1, pp. 18–29.
development of Ignatian Spirituality. The chapter has presented some key features of this spirituality that influence the way the Jesuits interact with different peoples and the way they practice their discernment and obedience. Going through a few examples of Jesuits who worked in India, China, and Vietnam, the chapter has led readers to an acknowledgment that, on the one hand, Jesuit missionaries genuinely tried to adapt themselves to the local culture, and hence were able to produce some positive outcomes (e.g., they brought new people to the Church or had a better understanding of their culture). On the other hand, they still could not find the right language to work in the complex and diverse Asian religious system.

In the second chapter, this thesis has given readers a presentation of Vietnamese history and culture and demonstrated how these elements influence the way the Vietnamese think, act and believe. From this foundation, the chapter has examined a theory that aims at a fourfold purpose: first, to identify the root of the distinctions between Eastern and Western ways of thinking and living; second, to study how the East-West differences positively and negatively influence the Jesuit mission in Vietnam; third, to explain why both sides use different methods to discern and why they have different focuses when they practice their obedience; and finally, to bring to the level of consciousness some issues that need attention.

Indeed, if the Jesuit missionaries in Vietnam had a tendency to use a transcendental and analytical approach, the Vietnamese embraced an existential and pragmatic one. If the Jesuit missionaries placed God at the center of everything including their practice of

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4 Influenced by the Spiritual Exercises (which are very practical and pragmatic), the Jesuit missionaries in Vietnam tried to incorporate them into their missions and teachings. Alexandre de Rhodes, for example, develops his Catechismus that can be taught through eight days based on the structure of the Exercises. See Alexandre de Rhodes, Catechismus pro ijs, qui volunt suscipere baptismum in octo dies divis (Roma: Typis Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide, 1651). Or see Peter Phan, Mission and Catechesis (New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 124ff. Nevertheless, these early missionaries did not stress the practical and pragmatic aspect of the Exercises because their main goal was not to lead people in making these Exercises but to preach and convert as many people as possible.
discernment and obedience, the latter focused on the implicit presence of an immanent God in the form of communal harmony. To a certain extent, the analytical and transcendental approach helps one to develop a vertical relationship with God, while the existential and pragmatic method helps one to establish a horizontal relationship with the divine through others. Although such a difference may lead one to tensions at times, it does not mean that one cannot find a meeting place between the two. On the contrary, the thesis has argued that such a place can be found when both sides are willing to enter into a mutually enriched dialogue. In fact, through dialogue, they will realize that both Ignatian spirituality (and Christianity in general) and Vietnamese culture encourage people not to get caught up in one side of the spectrum, but rather to seek for a more balanced approach.\(^5\)

This thesis has used the third and fourth chapters to talk about the concept, theological ground, and significances of discernment and obedience according to both Ignatian and Vietnamese traditions. For instance, Ignatian discernment and obedience have their ground in the love that Jesus has for His Father, and in a desire to imitate Him so as to obey the will of God. On the contrary, the ground of its Vietnamese counterpart can be found in a desire to maintain a communal harmony so as to establish an orderly society, be liberated from suffering, and follow the Way of the Tao. Because of this reason and because of the distinctions between Eastern and Western ways of thinking and living, the practice of discernment and obedience according to each tradition appears to be quite different. These differences, as these chapters have indicated, do not simply stop at the surface level. Rather,

\(^5\) One of the significant features of Ignatian spirituality is the willingness to be open to find God in all things and to love other people the way God loves them. Such features indicate that this spirituality encourages people to establish both vertical and horizontal relationships with God. Likewise, Vietnamese culture advises people not to be caught in a solely horizontal relationship with the Ultimate Being as it manifests only through others. In the context of this culture, an emphasis on a harmonious environment in the community does not necessarily reject the need of developing a close relationship between God and an individual.
they can become impediments preventing the Vietnamese from using the Ignatian method to discern in their own setting. Nevertheless, this does not mean that these obstacles are unsurpassable. As the fourth chapter of the thesis has pointed out, there are always possibilities underlying the difficulties.

These possibilities may not be realized until there is a mutually enriched dialogue between Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture. The last chapter has aimed at helping readers to see how these two entities can learn from and be enriched by the gifts received from each other. Through such a mutual dialogue, both sides can contribute and challenge one another so as to enhance the health and strength of the nuptial bond between them. Finally, the chapter has presented an Asian method that may become a helpful tool for both parties to improve their dialogue and hence relationship.

With the help of these five chapters, readers can look back at the engagement between Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture. They then realize that although the past engagement between these two parties bore fruit, it often had the taste of vinegar. To improve the fruit, there is an imperative need for cultivating the soil. An enriched dialogue of mutual respect and reciprocal learning is one way to cultivate this soil. And this thesis has proven that a mutually enriched dialogue between these two parties is possible.

2. Looking at the present: dialogue and inculturation are still needed

In an interview with Antonio Spodaro, Pope Francis asserts: “Discernment is always done in the presence of the Lord, looking at the signs, listening to the things that happen, the feeling of the people, especially the poor.” What does one know about the signs? How does

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one listen to the things that happen and feel the people’s feelings? If one prudently reflects on these questions, one will hear a call to interact with life rather than react to it, to listen and learn from the world rather than preach and play the role of a teacher, and to seek unity among religions through dialogue rather than impose one’s ideas upon others.

The process of interacting with life, listening and learning from the world, and seeking unity among religions presupposes discussion. Such a discussion, however, does not aim at arguing about which spirituality is more attractive or who holds a doctrine that is closer to the ultimate truth. Rather, it aims at helping people to understand that “spirituality is like a bridge. Each bridge does pretty much the same thing: gets [people] from one place to another, sometimes over perilous ground, or a river, or great heights. They do so in different ways. They might be built of rope, wood, bricks, stone or steel; as arches, cantilevers, or suspension bridges. Each spirituality offers [people] a distinctive passage to God.”

The acknowledgment that all spirituality—either Ignatian or Confucian, Taoist, or Buddhist—is only a means leading one toward an end (i.e., God) may lead to confusion. For there is a difference between a common goal and the various means orienting one to that goal. Moreover, if all spirituality offers the same thing, then why does one need to choose a particular spirituality over another? Why can’t one preserve and practice what one used to practice even if one has already converted to another religion? These questions recall a question that Mateo Ricci once asked: “If each religion is true and complete, then it is enough to believe one of them. Why should one have to practice the others?” Many people today have the same inquiry, and hence they tend to embrace either rigidity (e.g., not seeing the need of dialoguing with religions or cultures that are different from their own) or

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relativity (e.g., since everything is the same, then why bother to know or learn from the other). Such a view may lead one to the position that “I am spiritual, not Catholic or Buddhist or Taoist.” When this happens, one may fall into the trap of not caring much about the core identity of or the boundaries between religions. One will thus be more than willing to accept anything that appears to be helpful. Syncretism is therefore inevitable.

Because the Vietnamese culture upholds the values of complementary and harmony, some people lose the ability to identify the boundaries between ideas or practices. This was the reason why Jesuit missionaries such as de Rhodes often asked Vietnamese converts to distance themselves from their past religions, so as to protect themselves from syncretism. Although this phenomenon occurred and may continue to occur, it does not reflect the true meaning of complementarity and harmony. Thus, instead of disrespecting the Vietnamese way of proceeding, one should enter into dialogue to clarify misconceptions, compare notes, and understand what the others truly say or believe. Through such a humble dialogue, one will understand that:

If Christianity is the true religion, this does not mean that every other religion is false. It only witnesses to a different truth. And in interreligious dialogue, the confrontation between different truths can help us to discover a deeper truth than the one that we once believed to possess a monopoly. It is the attitude of dialogue itself, which is adopted in the heart of the religious subject who turns to the person of Jesus Christ without necessarily rejecting the different religion of his or her birth.

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9 Indeed, no method, theory, or explanation can replace the conversation itself. David Tracy insists on this fact: “Method, theory, and explanation can aid every conversation with every text, but none of them can replace the conversation itself. When we are conscious of what they are, we can use them well. Explanation and understanding, method and truth, theory and common sense, concept and symbol—all are partners in the complex discourse that is the dialogue of our day. Try to turn them against one another if you must, but they will find one another again when even one person begins a genuine conversation with any text.” See David Tracy, Plurality and Ambiguity (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987), 46.

It has been more than 400 years since Christianity in general and Ignatian spirituality in particular first interacted with Vietnam. The number of Catholics in this country today exceeds 6.6 million. Yet the Vietnamese populace still appears to be indifferent to or even suspicious of this religion.\(^{11}\) Granted that the communist propaganda against the Church caused more damage to its reputation, the lack of substantial and genuine dialogue worsens the situation. Many Vietnamese do not know or do not care much about the Ignatian ideal. Its spirituality has only limited influence in religious circles. This phenomenon will remain if one chooses to do nothing. This is unfortunate because the gifts that can be exchanged between the two parties will broaden the viewpoint of both and will enhance their values.

Of course, a dialogue between two people does not always end with agreement. On the contrary, “a sincere dialogue implies, on the one hand, mutual acceptance of differences, or even of contradictions, and on the other, respect for the free decision of persons taken according to the dictates of their conscience.”\(^ {12}\) Furthermore, dialogue does not always have to be filled with words and argumentations. Rather, it can take the form of a dialogue of life, action, theological exchange, and religious experience. The Asian in general and the Vietnamese in particular uphold the value of life, action, exchange, and experience. Hence, they will be delighted to converse with others through such languages.

Given the need to be faithful to Christianity while maintaining their Vietnamese identity, many Jesuits in Vietnam take inculturation and dialogue with other faiths seriously. In one of his books, Quý Hoàng presents a lively report. Some Jesuits in Vietnam have begun to perform inculturated masses that adopt many rituals taken from other faith traditions. For

example, at a Sunday mass, instead of taking the first reading from the Old Testament, they replace it with a reading taken from the teachings of non-Christian religious figures such as Lao Tzu, Confucius, or Buddha. To them, such teachings serve the same role as those of the Old Testament: preparing a way for the coming of the Messiah and the New Testament.

Concerning the Eucharistic Prayer (which is normally reserved only for the priest), they use the oration style that involves both female (yin) and male (yang) voices responding back and forth, as is often seen in a Buddhist, Taoist or Confucian prayer service. In the breaking of the bread, they perform this ritual as if they were performing a veneration of an ancestor (tiếc cúng in Vietnamese). The priest wears áo tê (a sacrificial robe) as worn by the Buddhist monks or Taoist priests in their own ceremonies. Such an Ignatian adaptation goes beyond the surface of picking and choosing elements that one likes or sees fit. Rather it is a true inculturation into the Vietnamese culture. Non-Christians who attend these inculturated masses feel right at home. At that very moment, they no longer see Christianity as a foreign religion. Many express a wish for these masses to be the norm for the entire Vietnamese Catholic Church. Of course, they walk out of these masses not as Catholics but as Buddhists or Confucianists or Taoists. Yet they have a deeper understanding of their religion and higher respect for Christianity.¹³

Some Vietnamese Jesuits do not hesitate to offer the Spiritual Exercises to non-Christians, or to adapt these exercises in a way that fits the needs of these special exercitants.

The Church in Vietnam also recognizes the importance of inter-religious dialogue. She forms many committees to serve the purpose of increasing the understanding of other faiths and promoting a spirit of respect, harmony, and tolerance among religions. These activities

definitely play a role in reducing suspicion, intolerance, ignorance of the beliefs and practices of other religions, and lack of appreciation for their significance.

This process will not be easy. Nonetheless, with the help of the lessons learned from the Water Path model and the attitude of humility (tháp), flexibility (mềm), and adaptability (tùy), people of all faith traditions understand that the distance from the common goal does not get any shorter if people try to cover it more quickly. Thus, they will be very patient and willing to work with each other so as to produce good fruits for humanity. For they all agree with Cardinal Walter Kasper that:

Every nation, culture, religion has its riches and its gifts, but also its limits and its dangers. A nation, culture or religion becomes narrow and evolves into ideology when it closes itself and when it absolutizes itself. Then the other nation, culture and religion become the enemy. The clash of civilizations will ensue. Dialogue is the only way to avoid such a disastrous clash [italics added].

Without a doubt, inculturation between people of different faiths has been, is, and forever will be essential. It is, as Marcello de Carvalho Azevedo puts it, “the only way for the Church to engage in a dialogue with modernity throughout the world.”

3. **Looking toward the future: potential effects of the Water Path model on the future engagement between Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture**

In one of his books, Michael Gallagher predicts: “Future conflicts will not be primarily ideological or economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural,” because “cultural characteristics change less easily than

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political and economic ones.”

Dermot Lane goes further in emphasizing the need for dialogue, viewing it as a non-negotiable requirement for peace among nations. He asserts that “there will be no peace among the nations without peace among religions. No peace among religions without dialogue.” Although people may not go as far as equating inter-religious dialogue with peace among the nations, they may agree with the suggestion to improve the conversation among religions and cultures. What happens around the world reaffirms this apparent need.

When one looks toward the future, one may not question the necessity of developing a mutually enriched dialogue between religions and cultures. Rather, one may ponder how to do it effectively, given the complexity and diversity of today’s world. One understands that shutting other religions up will never work. One also understands that pluralism is a modern reality and is, in and of itself, a good thing. Hence, it should be encouraged. Yet pluralism may lead one to indifferentism, relativism, or syncretism. Thus, there must be a continuous discernment of the ways one should think and act in other cultures. There must be a concern about how to maintain one’s core identity amidst diversity. There must also be a search for an efficient model that works in as many settings as possible.

17 Dermot Lane, Stepping Stones to Other Religions (New York: Orbis, 2011), 26.
18 Violence in the name of God very much affirms this, whether it takes the form of justifications of the New York and Paris attacks (2001 and 2015), or the turmoil in the Middle-East and North Africa. Of course, the causes of these terrible events are complicated and not necessarily rooted solely in religious differences. However, a lack of understanding and communication, intolerance for political, cultural, religious and economic differences, and an emphasis on ideologies play a significant role in causing them.
19 Unfortunately this has happened at times in the past; and because of that, William Ernst Hocking insists that “instead of attempting to shut other religions up in metaphysical compartments, and then destroying the compartments, it would certainly be fairer – not to say more honorable – if we were to attempt rather to anticipate for them what they mean, opening to them that larger room toward which they trend.” See William Ernst Hocking, “The Way of Re-conception,” Attitudes Towards Other Religions, ed. by Owen C. Thomas (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 142–143.
20 Here I do not mean to promote a search for a one-size-fits-all model. Rather, I suggest that instead of using a model that only works exclusively in one particular setting, we should try our best to use a model that can be applied across boundaries and differences.
In the past, people used different models that aimed at helping people of various faiths and cultures to integrate and coexist in harmony. The melting pot, salad bowl, mosaic, and web and quilt models are examples. Unfortunately, it seems that none of these models truly works.\textsuperscript{21} Hence, I wonder if the Water Path model as suggested by Lao Tzu may be a better fit.

Indeed, this Water Path model not only shows one the way water reacts to all things around it,\textsuperscript{22} but it also shows how the two components within the water molecule interact with each other, and yet still maintain their true identity. For example, within the water molecule, hydrogen and oxygen interact with one another in a harmonious fashion (Fig. 1). The boundary between them disappears, yet the identity of each is still intact. Hydrogen is forever itself, and so is oxygen. Each molecule can bring with it everything it has, and together they create a new set of properties that do not take away individual core values. Moreover, under different pressures and circumstances, the new creation can exist in all states, liquid, solid, or gaseous. One can use this model in the future engagement between individuals and cultures. Externally, one knows how and when to use the concept of flexibility (mêm), adaptability (tùy), and humility (tháp) to interact with one’s dialogue partners. Internally, one knows how to use the insights learned from others to enrich one’s values and yet still keep the core identity intact.

\textsuperscript{21} For example, in the melting pot model, the cultures involved are supposed to melt into one another to create a new homogeneous society. In reality, the stronger party always remains the same, while the weaker is absorbed by or melted into the other, and thus its uniqueness is destroyed. In the mosaic model, each culture is allowed to coexist, but no one knows much about the clear boundaries and the manner in which the two parties interact with one another. Similarly, in the web and quilt models, it is difficult to know the true nature of complementarity and support. Moreover, each party appears to function independently from the others, and the connections only happen at the borders of each piece.

\textsuperscript{22} For this point, see Chapter 5, pp. 168ff.
The relationship between Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture can be seen through this lens. In this relationship, both sets of values interact with each other in a harmonious fashion. The boundary between them at times seems to disappear (see the example of the inculturated Eucharist in pages 190–191), yet the identity of each is maintained and even enriched by and through such an engagement. Under different pressures and circumstances such as the pressure of discerning purely for the purpose of discovering God’s will (Ch. 3) or maintaining a communal peacefulness (Ch. 4), both are still able to discern effectively. In fact, if people are allowed to be religious inter-religiously, they can still place God and (not or) communal harmony at the center of their discernment. In that sense, the above-mentioned pressure will not threaten the existence of the new form.

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1**

A water molecule is tasteless, colorless, and odorless. These properties shed light on the concept of mutual enrichment. Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture in its hyphenated form should not embrace any prejudice or show any favoritism. They should function as both a substantive and an adjective for one another. The color or values of one factor should not determine the fate of the other or that of the new combination. It does not
necessarily mean that each member’s contribution must be exactly equal. In the water molecule, oxygen attracts electrons much stronger than hydrogen, yet does not overpower or threaten the existence of hydrogen. The relationship between Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture should be similar. Certainly, in such a relationship, it is acceptable for one to begin with a particular foundation. A hyphenated form does not mean that one has to start with something new or that one has no relation to one’s past. Rather, it means that one can embrace both at the same time in the sense that one has a first major tradition and draws on the second to a greater or lesser degree. In other words, one can begin where one feels most comfortable and confident, and then naturally and gradually engage other values and integrate them into one’s life.

In the water molecule, it is not easy to separate the two members, given the net dipole moment between them. This net dipole moment helps to bring the two closer to each other. Only through a complex procedure such as electrolysis, when the supplied energy comes in to break the bond between them, can the two molecules be separated. A similar relationship can obtain between Vietnamese culture and Ignatian spirituality in their hyphenated forms. The emphasis on detachment, compassion, loving one another, praying, reverencing, glorifying, and serving the Ultimate Being is so strong on both sides that it can function as the net dipole that exists between them and holds them together. Not only do the two sides hold together, but they also support and complement each other.

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When atoms in a molecule share electrons unequally, they create what is called a dipole moment. This occurs when one atom is more electronegative than another, resulting in that atom pulling more tightly on the shared pair of electrons. One of the most common examples is the water molecule, made up of one oxygen atom and two hydrogen atoms. The differences in electronegativity and lone electrons give oxygen a partial negative charge and each hydrogen a partial positive charge. Electrical attraction between water molecules due to this dipole pulls individual molecules closer together, making it more difficult to separate the molecules and therefore raising the boiling point.
Finally, each water molecule connects with others through a hydrogen bond (Fig. 2). This close association helps to maximize their usefulness, since one molecule alone cannot do anything. Similarly, the harmonious connection between the Vietnamese and Ignatian traits exists not only in a given individual but also between individuals. There is a sense of togetherness, interdependence, and symbiosis among them.  

![Hydrogen bond diagram]

*Figure 2*

It appears that the Water Path model has potential effects on the future engagement between Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture. With the help of this model, people can do the following things. First, with humility and with the awareness that all are equally valued in God’s eyes, both sides can bring good gifts to the same table and offer them to their dialogue partners. Second, they can incorporate the received gifts and become enriched without losing their core identity. Third, they can strike a balance between the *both-and* and *either-or* approach, and once in a while step outside of their own method to utilize a method

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24 This is what we need most in our diverse world. Many people crave these components. As David Bosh urges us: “We need to retrieve togetherness, interdependence, symbiosis. The individual is not a monad, but part of an organism. We live in one world, in which the rescue of some at the expense of others is not possible. Only together is there salvation and survival. This includes not only a new relationship to nature but also among humans.” See David J. Bosh, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 370–371.
that they have rarely used before. Fourth, they can let both Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture be challenged by the concepts, questions, or values of the other. Through these challenges, each side will revisit its position to see if it is still relevant to human life; and it will make changes if need be. Fifth, each side can seek out lacking complements, and through dialogue find a common ground/language that can move things forward. Finally, they can allow Ignatian spirituality and the Vietnamese culture to work with each other as a whole rather than as parts. Like the hydrogen and oxygen molecules working selflessly with each other to form a new molecule (water), people on both sides will try to avoid simply protecting their own benefits or using their own means, but rather be open to accepting everything that points them to the ultimate end, i.e., God.

4. Implications

This thesis attempts to contribute to the area of inculturation within the context of the specific engagement of Ignatian spirituality and Vietnamese culture. It has four implications. The first implication addresses the relationship between faith and culture. More specifically, it addresses the question of how Christianity in general and Ignatian spirituality in particular can be part of a culture rather than a foreign entity, and how this Christian faith transforms and is transformed by other cultures with which it interacts.

The second implication relates to the area of ecclesial and missiological enterprise. It suggests that if any religious institution desires to be a truly universal entity, it must extend itself beyond certain premises and ways of thinking. A genuine inculturation will ensure this goal if people are willing to learn from one another, especially from traditions that are different from their own.
The third implication is in the area of spiritual formation and theological education. This thesis suggests that the spiritual formation and theological education of people across faith traditions will be much stronger if there is a better understanding of and dialogue between religions. Such formation and education, of course, goes beyond the level of collecting facts and data and extends to a reflective and contemplative endeavor by which people see the other in light of their own faith and culture, and their own in light of the other.

This last implication relates to political action and the relationship between nations. By having a mutually enriched dialogue among religions, religions can set an example for how human beings in other disciplines can do the same, so that everybody can walk firmly along the same path to create a welcoming and peaceful environment for the entire human race.

5. Final thoughts

Before the arrival of Christianity in Vietnam, the Vietnamese interacted with and integrated what they had learned from Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism into their indigenous tradition. In turn, the other three religions inculturated well into the Vietnamese social, cultural, and religious system. The fabric they made up thus appeared to be seamless. The Vietnamese do not have any problem with allowing Christianity to be part of their own fabric. But they expect it to follow the example of the triple religions whose origins were outside of Vietnam. How does Christianity respond to this expectation? Will it follow Jesus’ example to make the move? Will it take up the challenge proposed by Anthony Gittins?

Jesus moved, listened, received, shared, adapted; he rejoiced, and he wept, he knew when to ask for advice, and he was able very simply to give advice. Shouldn’t we? Jesus shared himself; he shared his time and his energy, his presence and his power, his prayer and his passion. He effectively contextualized himself, incarnated himself, ‘inculturated’ himself. Couldn’t we? Jesus was able to name his needs. He was so
well rooted, psychologically and spiritually, that he was able to claim his need for privacy and prayer for companionship and consolation. He did not burn himself out in misplaced zeal but used to withdraw, be alone, and go to the hills. Mustn’t we? Jesus identified and worked with the local community; he picked unlikely people to be close to him and carry the responsibility after him. He took pity on the people, in general, the crowds around him, and the individuals up in trees or by the roadside. Daren’t we? Jesus underwent linguistic and cultural adaptation, and assimilation; he used a form of language that engaged and entertained and informed people, telling stories, preaching, spinning parables. He was comprehensible. He used the technique of engagement with the audience: question and answer, dialogue, participation. Don’t we? Jesus was always set for the falling and rising of many; his magnetism saw to that. In whatever he did or said, Jesus never became less than challenging and relevant. Can Jesus, as a professional stranger, teach us and inspire us to be more credible preachers-of-the-living-world, more passionate lovers-of-the-unlovely-and-unloved, more servant-like and Christ-like missionaries?  

Indeed, shouldn’t we, couldn’t we, mustn’t we, daren’t we, and don’t we follow the example of the One whom we adore, so that we too can be better and help others to be better as well? Should we ignore His invitation to be light for the world and salt for the earth (Matthew 5:13–14)? Should we forget that salt and light do not confront or try to win, but rather, they enhance what is present and help others to see? These perhaps are questions, not just for academic purposes, but also for our personal spiritual journeys. Only when we answer these questions can we call ourselves faithful disciples and followers of Jesus.

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