Philosophy, Religion, and State: The Nguyễn Dynasty and Its Implications for Contemporary Vietnamese Religious Policy

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Abstract
The Nguyễn Dynasty (1802–1945) presents a puzzle. The same court that grounded its legitimacy in a Confucian moral-cosmological order shaped by *tam giáo đồng nguyên* (the philosophical doctrine about the convergence of the three teachings) drove the most thoroughgoing Confucianization of Vietnamese institutions any dynasty had attempted *and* produced the country's most severe anti-Catholic edicts. Religious pluralism within, religious exclusion at the boundary. This article reads the puzzle philosophically rather than as policy history or sociology of religion. It argues that the Nguyễn court's engagement with religion instantiates three differentiated philosophical postures of the state toward religious otherness — accommodation, control, and exclusion — keyed not to a chronological sequence across reigns but to the philosophical-anthropological compatibility of each tradition with the state's account of person, community, and political authority. The three-model typology, recast as a typology of philosophical postures, is engaged with the Western philosophy of religion (Charles Taylor, Talal Asad, Jürgen Habermas, William Cavanaugh), with Confucian political-religious anthropology (Tu Weiming), and with Vietnamese philosophical voices (Trần Đình Hượu, Phan Ngọc, Lương Kim Định) that the Anglophone literature has rarely engaged as substantive interlocutors. The contemporary stakes follow. Vietnam's post-2003 reform consensus, the 2016 Belief and Religion Law, and the 13th Party Congress's "religion as resource" formulation operationalize a philosophical disposition continuous with the deeper Vietnamese inheritance of *tam giáo đồng nguyên*. The lesson is philosophical, not nostalgic: a state's relation to religion is most stable when its philosophical commitments toward person, community, and transcendence are made explicit and operationalized in transparent legal-procedural form. The Vietnamese case thereby contributes a worked non-Western answer to a universal philosophical question.
Key words: Nguyễn Dynasty, philosophy of religion, state-religion relations, tam giáo đồng nguyên, Charles Taylor, Tu Weiming, Vietnamese Catholicism

1. Introduction

The Nguyễn court exhibited confusion and often contradiction in its approach and response to religion. Across the dynasty's century and a half, the same court oscillated between tolerance and severe prohibition, patronized Buddhist monasteries while regulating monastic registers, presided over a richly plural folk-religious life while issuing the country's most violent anti-Catholic edicts. The puzzle has usually been treated as a problem in policy history, or as a problem in the sociology of religion — Catholicism's transnational structure on one side, the court's Confucian conservatism on the other, with each successive reign's posture explained by the conjuncture it faced. That framing is not wrong. It is, however, philosophically incomplete. The same court that grounded its legitimacy in a Confucian moral-cosmological order shaped by *tam giáo đồng nguyên* — the three teachings sharing one root (Phan Ngọc, 2002; Vuong et al., 2018) — drove the most thoroughgoing Confucianization of Vietnamese institutions any dynasty had attempted (Woodside, 1971; Cooke, 1995) *and* produced the country's most severe anti-Catholic edicts (Ramsay, 2008; Nguyễn Quang Hưng, 2009). Religious pluralism within, religious exclusion at the boundary. This is not the mark of a confused court. It is the mark of a court whose philosophical commitments, when

made explicit, generate a determinate posture — accommodating where philosophical anthropologies converge, excluding where they fundamentally diverge.

My paper reframes the puzzle philosophically. The contribution is to read the Nguyễn case as instantiating a universal philosophical question — what posture should the state adopt toward religious otherness? — under the particular Vietnamese answer of *tam giáo đồng nguyên*. The question is one Augustine, Aquinas, Hobbes, Rousseau, Hegel, Rawls, Habermas, Asad, and Charles Taylor have each addressed in different keys. The Vietnamese answer, distinctive and underdeveloped in the Anglophone literature, deserves engagement at the same philosophical seriousness as those Western interlocutors.

A four-camp gap shapes the existing scholarship. Vietnamese-internal religious history (Camp A) — Nguyễn Tài Thư on Buddhism, Nguyễn Quang Hưng on Catholicism under the Nguyễn, Đỗ Quang Hưng on contemporary state-religion theory — has the deepest archival reach but its philosophical apparatus rarely engages international debates directly. Western missionary and Catholic history (Camp B) — Léopold Cadière, Charles Keith (2012), Jacob Ramsay (2008) — reads the period through the Catholic mission and tends to treat Confucian and Buddhist traditions as background. Anglophone Vietnam history (Camp C) — Alexander Woodside (1971), Nola Cooke (1995, 2008), Liam Kelley (2006), Mark McLeod (1991), Joseph Buttinger (1958) — asks theoretically ambitious political-historical questions but treats the encounter as a problem in political history rather than political philosophy. A fourth camp, philosophical engagement with Vietnamese state-religion relations (Camp D), remains the most underdeveloped. Trần Đình Hượu (1996), Phan Ngọc (2002), and Lương Kim Định have laid Vietnamese-internal philosophical groundwork; no existing study integrates these resources with the Western philosophy of religion (Taylor, 2004; 2007; Asad, 2003; Habermas, 2006; Cavanaugh, 2009) and with Confucian political-religious philosophy (Tu, 1989) in a sustained reading of the Nguyễn case. My main aim is to contribute to this fourth stream directly.

The research question can be stated compactly. *Read philosophically, what posture toward religious otherness did the Nguyễn court adopt across 1802–1945, in response to indigenous traditions and to Catholicism, and what does that pattern teach contemporary Vietnamese — and comparative — philosophical thinking about state-religion relations?* The framing presupposes nothing about whether the Nguyễn approach was right or wrong by some prior standard. It presupposes only that the court's edicts and policies, read with hermeneutical care, presupposed determinate philosophical commitments about person, community, and political authority — and that those commitments are intelligible philosophically and not only politically.

The article's contribution is fourfold. First, it installs the **three-model typology — accommodation, control, exclusion** — as a *philosophical* typology of state postures toward religious otherness, not merely as a sociological taxonomy of policy. Each posture instantiates a distinct philosophical claim about what the state owes to religious traditions in its territory and what those traditions owe to the state. Second, it installs *tam giáo đồng nguyên* as the philosophical doctrine — not merely the cultural pattern — that grounds Vietnam's distinctive practice of religious pluralism, and that makes intelligible both the accommodation of Buddhism, Daoism, and folk religion within and the exclusion of Catholicism at the boundary. Third, it brings Vietnamese philosophical voices into genuine dialogue with international philosophy of religion: Trần Đình Hượu, Phan Ngọc, Lương Kim Định, and Tu Weiming function as interlocutors at the same level as Taylor, Asad, Habermas, and Cavanaugh, not as local color attached to a Western frame. Fourth, it reads the post-2003 Vietnamese policy framework — Resolution 25-NQ/TW, the 2016 Belief and Religion Law, the 13th Party Congress's "religion as resource" formulation — philosophically rather than descriptively, as a worked Vietnamese answer to a universal philosophical question.

The methodological framework draws on philosophical hermeneutics — applied to Nguyễn-era edicts, *châu bản* (vermilion records), and missionary correspondence — combined with historical-philosophical reconstruction of the philosophical commitments implicit in policy, comparative philosophy of religion engaging Vietnamese and Western frameworks, and application to the contemporary philosophical question of religious freedom, pluralism, and the legitimate posture of a non-Western polity in the immanent frame (Taylor, 2007). The seven sections that follow develop the argument: theoretical apparatus and the three philosophical postures; historical context for Vietnam 1802–1945; the four philosophical-religious worldviews under the Nguyễn; the three postures applied across the four major reigns and the protectorate transition; philosophical lessons for contemporary religious policy; and a concluding statement of my paper's philosophical contribution.

2. Theoretical framework: the philosophy of state-religion relations and the three models

The apparatus in this study operates in four moves, which the present section installs in turn.

The philosophical question

What is the proper relation of state and religion? The question has a long Western lineage. Augustine's two cities — the earthly city and the city of God as parallel commonwealths — set the medieval terms in *De civitate Dei*. Aquinas distinguished temporal and spiritual swords without dissolving either into the other. Hobbes, in *Leviathan*, made the sovereign's civil authority the condition of religious peace. It is revealing here because the state defined orthodoxy as the price of common life. On the other hand, Rousseau's civil religion in *Du contrat social* talked about a minimal civic creed binding citizens together. The next one was Hegel who read state and religion as mutually grounding each other in *Sittlichkeit*. Rawls came with some fresh ideas. In *Political Liberalism*, he articulated public reason as the requirement that citizens reason together from premises mutually accessible across comprehensive doctrines. Habermas's recent work "Religion in the Public Sphere" (2006) modified the strict Rawlsian picture: religious citizens may legitimately introduce religious reasons in the informal public sphere, with translation required at the institutional threshold of formal political deliberation, and secular citizens are obliged to take religious moral content seriously as potentially carrying semantic content not yet exhausted by secular reason (Habermas, 2006). Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007) reframes the entire question. The secular, on Taylor's reading, is not the absence of religion but one option within a modern social imaginary — the immanent frame, within which both belief and unbelief now operate (Taylor, 2007). The three meanings of "secular" Taylor distinguishes — religion's retreat from public spaces, the decline of belief and practice, and the conditions of belief themselves (it is important to specify precisely what is at stake when "secular" is invoked across very different historical settings).

To these resources Talal Asad adds a critical guard. "The secular" and "religion" are themselves historically specific Christian-European categorizations, produced together in the rise of modern Western statecraft (Asad, 2003). The categories are mutually constitutive in modernity rather than universal features of human societies. Asad's caution is decisive for any Anglophone analysis of a non-Western case: the question whether the Nguyễn dynasty was "secular enough" or "religiously tolerant" by modern standards is poorly framed, since the very categories presuppose a formation the Nguyễn court did not occupy. William Cavanaugh's *The Myth of Religious Violence* (2009) extends the warning: the binary of "religious violence vs. secular peace" is itself a political-philosophical construction that obscures how secular states themselves generate violence and how "religion" was constructed to legitimate state monopoly on lethal force (Cavanaugh, 2009). The Nguyễn-Catholic conflict, on

Cavanaugh's reading, is intelligible not as religion-versus-state but as a contest between two political philosophies of community.

The Confucian-East Asian alternative

Tu Weiming's *Centrality and Commonality* (1989) reads Confucianism as religious-philosophical anthropology. The human is understood as constitutively embedded in cosmic, moral, and political community; the ruler's moral self-cultivation extends outward through ritual into the polity; *zhong* (centrality, the inner equilibrium of the moral self) and *yong* (commonality, the everyday application) describe a mode of religiosity in which the human, the cosmic, and the political are not separated (Tu, 1989). Being religious in the Confucian perspective, Tu writes, is "engaged in the process of learning to be fully human" — ultimate self-transformation as a communal act and as a faithful dialogical response to the transcendent (Tu, 1989). This is not "secular humanism" in the Western sense; it is a distinct mode of religiosity, an *anthropocosmic* vision (Tu, 1989). Sungmoon Kim's *Public Reason Confucianism* (2016) extends the framework into contemporary political philosophy: a Confucian polity does not require Rawlsian neutrality among comprehensive doctrines but can ground state-religion relations in a publicly shared moral-cosmological background without violating defensible standards of legitimacy. The Nguyễn court, on my reading, operated within this Confucian philosophical frame — though the specifically Vietnamese articulation of that frame requires its own apparatus.

The Vietnamese particularity — tam giáo đồng nguyên as philosophy

The doctrine that the three teachings (Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism) share one root is not folk syncretism. It is a substantive philosophical claim that *lễ* (ritual propriety), *từ bi* (compassion) with the doctrine of dependent origination, and *vô vi* (non-coercive action) converge on a single cosmological order in which the human is morally embedded. Phan Ngọc reads *tam giáo đồng nguyên* as the philosophical-cultural mechanism by which Vietnam absorbs and transforms incoming traditions — what he calls *Việt hóa* (Vietnamization), the active reshaping of any imported cultural element by an invariant Vietnamese cultural matrix (Phan Ngọc, 2002). Trần Đình Hượu reads it as the philosophical inheritance against which Vietnamese modernity must be thought, with Vietnamese Confucianism a distinctive Vietnamese reception rather than a Sino-Confucian transplantation (Trần Đình Hượu, 1996). Lương Kim Định's "An vi" — peaceful coexistence, settled-being — describes the philosophical disposition that follows. Vuong et al. (2018) supply a contemporary empirical vocabulary: *cultural additivity*, the willingness to "incorporate into [a] culture the values and norms from other systems of beliefs that might or might not logically contradict with principles of [the] existing system of beliefs" (Vuong et al., 2018: 4). Vietnamese intellectual life had no exact equivalent to the Latin term *religio*; it spoke of *đạo* (way) and *giáo* (teaching) rather than of religion in the Latin-canonical sense (Vuong et al., 2018: 4). The cultural-additivity finding — empirically corroborated by Bayesian analysis of 307 Vietnamese folktales — also complicates "liberal" readings of *tam giáo đồng nguyên* as flat religious unification. The structure is hierarchically additive, with Confucianism the dominant additive partner under the Nguyễn (Vuong et al., 2018: 2). This frames the philosophical question for the Nguyễn case: what posture does a state grounded in *tam giáo đồng nguyên* — a structured but additive philosophical pluralism — adopt toward an incoming foreign religion that does not share the underlying philosophical anthropology?

The three models as philosophical typology

State responses to religious otherness fall along a continuum of philosophical postures, not merely policies. **Accommodation/integration** is the philosophical posture in which the religion is treated as continuous with, or absorbable into, the state's moral-cosmological order. The Nguyễn court's relation to orthodox Confucianism, and (in earlier periods) to Buddhism and folk religion under *tam giáo đồng nguyên*, instantiates

this posture. **Control/regulation** is the philosophical posture in which the religion is permitted but its public form is subordinated to the state's prior philosophical commitments. Minh Mạng's edicts of the 1820s, requiring missionary registration and restricting movement, instantiate control read philosophically: the demand is that Catholicism's institutional form conform to the Confucian-cosmological order. **Exclusion/suppression** is the philosophical posture in which the religion is read as introducing an alien philosophical anthropology incompatible with the state's account of person, community, and political authority. The persecution edicts under Tự Đức from 1851 onward — the language of which explicitly names Catholicism as a "beast-in-human-form heresy" disrupting the order of *lễ* and ancestor veneration — instantiate exclusion as fully articulated philosophical posture.

The typology is *ideal-typical* in a Weberian-philosophical sense — analytical postures against which actual edicts and policies can be read for the philosophical commitments they presuppose. Real Nguyễn policy in any given year often combined elements of two or three postures, because the state was negotiating multiple distinct philosophical relations simultaneously: accommodation toward Confucian-Buddhist-folk continuity, control toward those at the philosophical edge, exclusion toward those whose philosophical anthropology was read as alien. The classical insight that conflict can be analytically productive — articulated by Coser (1956) and Dahrendorf (1959) — is incorporated as background. The philosophical sources just canvassed carry the theoretical load. Casanova's (1994) disaggregation of the secularization thesis into differentiation, decline, and privatization remains useful: the Vietnamese case complicates the privatization thesis sharply, since Vietnamese religious life was never privatized in the modern Western sense (Casanova, 1994). Turner's (2011) reading of the constant tension between state control function and religion's mobilization power supplies the bridge from political philosophy to political sociology. Đỗ Quang Hưng (2021) provides the Vietnamese-internal theoretical articulation of how a polity *qualifiedly* secular — neither Western-liberal "wall of separation" nor anti-religious laïcité — can ground state-religion relations philosophically in its own terms.

3. Historical context: Vietnam 1802–1945

Five compact moves scaffold the philosophical analysis that follows.

Dynastic foundation

Gia Long unified the country in 1802 after defeating the Tây Sơn — a movement whose own religious dimensions, including popular Buddhist resonance and pragmatic openness to Catholic communities, are themselves historiographically contested (Dutton, 2006). The Nguyễn court inherited a fractured polity and built a centralized administrative apparatus modeled selectively on Qing institutions (Woodside, 1971). The choice carried philosophical implications: the Qing model embedded a particular reading of Confucian political order, and the Vietnamese borrowing was filtered — consciously and partially — through Vietnamese particularities. Woodside's careful institutional analysis demonstrates that what looks at first like Sinification is in fact selective adoption: the demographic asymmetry between Vietnam and Qing China, the cultural diversity between bureaucrats and peasants, the residual autonomy of the Vietnamese village (*làng*), and the southern frontier expansion (*Nam tiến*) gave Nguyễn institutions a distinctively Vietnamese coloration even where the institutional vocabulary was Sino-Confucian (Woodside, 1971; Cooke, 1995).

Economic foundation

The economy rested on wet-rice agriculture, communal-and-state landholding, restricted foreign trade, and a recurring pattern of fiscal crisis worsened by mid-century natural disasters and peasant uprisings. The court's measures to reclaim land, expand cultivated areas, and build dykes against floods produced uneven results. Traditional handicrafts remained on a small scale, and conservative policies restricted foreign trade. Buttinger's compressed political history of the dynasty, while superseded as a

comprehensive reference by later scholarship (notably Keith Taylor, 2013), remains a useful synthesis of the period's economic-political dynamics and is widely cited in Vietnamese-language scholarship even where its evaluations of individual emperors are now revised (Buttinger, 1958). From the mid-nineteenth century, the economy weakened sharply under wars, natural disasters, and the court's failure to keep pace with the dynamics of international trade — a national fiscal crisis, hardship for the population, and rising seeds of social instability set the conditions under which religious policy was made. The court's responses to peasant uprisings, including those with religious dimensions or motivated by Catholic communities' marginal social positions, were typically harsh, and the harshness compounded both the fiscal and the legitimacy crisis.

Political-philosophical foundation

The Nguyễn court drove a more thoroughgoing Confucianization than any prior Vietnamese dynasty, especially under Minh Mạng (Cooke, 1995; Woodside, 1971). Confucianism functioned not merely as ideology but as philosophical anthropology: *trung* (loyalty), *hiếu* (filial piety), *lễ* (propriety), and *nghĩa* (righteousness) describing a particular account of person and political community. Read philosophically through Tu Weiming, this is not a thin moralism but a thick anthropocosmic vision: the human as constitutively relational, the ruler as moral exemplar, governance as ritual self-cultivation extended to the polity (Tu, 1989). Liam Kelley's revisionist work on "Confucianism" in Vietnam cautions against treating Vietnamese Confucianism as a stable analytical object: what was actually deployed under the Nguyễn was a mandarinal-literati culture with strong Confucian orthodoxy at its philosophical core, not a unified system traceable to any single classical canon (Kelley, 2006). We need to notice Kelley's caution and proceed with the discipline he demands: when "Confucianism" appears below, the reference is to the specific philosophical-anthropological commitments operative in the Nguyễn court — ritual propriety at the *Nam Giao* sacrifice to Heaven and Earth, examination Confucianism reproducing the mandarin class, and the moral-cosmological reading of state legitimacy that grounds both.

Foreign-policy context and Cultural Transition

The Nguyễn maintained tributary relations with the Qing and underestimated, until too late, the qualitative change Western intervention represented. Unequal treaties — the Nhâm Tuất Treaty of 1862, the Giáp Tuất Treaty of 1874 — progressively eroded sovereignty, and the court's conservative reading of the international order conditioned its religious posture directly. By the late nineteenth century, the Chinese state was, in the contemporary Vietnamese phrase, "no different from a large, decayed house on the verge of collapse, yet we still did not awaken, remaining delusional that the country was still strong and could help us in danger" (Trần Trọng Kim, 2018). The court read Catholicism through the lens of French intervention and could not, late, distinguish the religious from the geopolitical question (McLeod, 1991; Cao Huy Thuần, 2023). The combination of "conservatism in political thought" and "the fierce pressure of colonialism" pushed the dynasty into a spiral of decline (Trần Trọng Kim, 2018): internal weaknesses produced stagnant production and harsh suppression of peasant uprisings; external rigidities produced trade isolation and a religious posture that hardened just as the conditions for a more flexible response were emerging.

After 1862, religious policy was no longer fully the Nguyễn court's to make. The protectorate state imposed Catholic protection as a feature of colonial administration. Asad's argument about the colonial-modern construction of "religion" becomes directly relevant: the philosophical category through which the post-1862 state engaged religion was itself a Western imposition, and the imposition transformed the structural conditions under which the three-model framework operated (Asad, 2003). Keith's

Catholic Vietnam (2012) supplies the empirical material for this structural transformation; I return to it in section 5.

The historical scaffolding is intentionally compact. Every paragraph is meant to do work for the philosophical analysis that follows, not to retrieve the entire Nguyễn political history. The reader needs only enough to understand what religious policy was responding to.

4. Religious life under the Nguyễn as philosophical worldviews

Rather than describe the four traditions sociologically, this section reads each as a distinct philosophical-religious worldview with its own account of person, community, and transcendence — what each tradition presupposes about reality and what each would *demand* of the state. *Tam giáo đồng nguyên* is the philosophical doctrine that holds the first three in a single moral-cosmological order; Catholicism stands outside it.

Tam giáo đồng nguyên as philosophy

The three teachings sharing one root is a substantive philosophical claim, not folk syncretism. By 1802 the doctrine was old, deeply lay-internalized, and partly attenuated at the elite level by the deepening Confucianization the late Lê and early Nguyễn pursued. Phan Ngọc reads the doctrine as the philosophical-cultural mechanism by which Vietnam absorbs and transforms incoming traditions, with *Việt hóa* (Vietnamization) operating systematically across the village (*làng*) and the literati class (Phan Ngọc, 2002). Trần Đình Hượu reads it as the philosophical inheritance against which Vietnamese modernity must be thought, treating Confucianism not as a fixed essence but as a historical phenomenon that has been continuously reshaped by Vietnamese institutions and by interaction with Buddhist and folk-religious substrates (Trần Đình Hượu, 1996). Lương Kim Định's "An vi" describes the philosophical disposition — peaceful settled-being — that follows. Vuong et al. (2018) confirm empirically that the structure is additive rather than substitutive: under the Nguyễn, when other religious values appear in a Vietnamese folktale, they tend to be absorbed into a fundamentally Confucian moral frame, with Confucian and Daoist values appearing jointly producing strong dominance of Confucian key messages (Vuong et al., 2018). We do not treat *tam giáo đồng nguyên* as untouched by 1802; it treats it as the operative philosophical background against which the Nguyễn court's increasingly orthodox Confucianism stood out — a structured pluralism, not a flat one, in which Confucianism was the dominant additive partner.

Confucianism as philosophical worldview

Confucianism functioned simultaneously as ethical framework, political ideology, ritual system, and governing technique. Read philosophically through Tu Weiming, this is not a flattened administrative ideology but a religious-philosophical anthropology: the human as constitutively relational, the ruler as moral exemplar, governance as ritual self-cultivation extended to the polity (Tu, 1989). What this *demands* of the state is that the state itself be the visible instantiation of cosmic moral order. The *tế Nam Giao* (sacrifice to Heaven and Earth at the southern altar) staged that order ritually; the examination system (*thi Hương*, *thi Hội*) reproduced the mandarin class who carried the philosophical commitments through generations; the bestowal of imperial decrees and the distribution of incense certificates were both religious symbols and administrative mechanisms reinforcing order. Adriano di St. Thecla's *Opusculum de Sectis apud Sinenses et Tunkinenses*, a careful early-modern Catholic missionary's account composed around 1750 in Latin and edited by Olga Dror, documents the institutional embedding of Confucianism in pre-Nguyễn Vietnam in proto-ethnographic detail — the cult of Confucius, the role of *literati* in state and society, the textual canon and its ritual deployment — and supplies an empirical baseline for the philosophical claim (Adriano di St. Thecla, 1750/2002). The Nguyễn state was not a neutral procedural framework above religion in the modern liberal sense; it *was* the public form of a religious-philosophical anthropology. Buttinger's compressed political history

captures the resulting dynamic: "In the early 19th century, the Nguyễn Dynasty gained control of the country, consolidated the unity of the absolute monarchy, and vigorously promoted Song Neo-Confucianism to establish order" (Buttinger, 1958). Read philosophically, the promotion of Song Neo-Confucianism was not ideological window-dressing for raison d'état but the operationalization of a philosophical anthropology in which state, ritual, and cosmic order were continuous.

Buddhism as philosophical worldview

Under the Nguyễn, Buddhism remained the popular spiritual default — temples as places for *cầu an* (prayer for peace) and *tế âm* (memorial ceremonies), monks as ritual specialists during epidemics and famines — while losing some of the institutional standing it had enjoyed under the Lý and Trần dynasties (Nguyễn Lang, 1973–1992; Nguyễn Tài Thư, 1991). Read philosophically, Vietnamese Buddhism — anchored in the Trúc Lâm / Thiền tradition descended from Trần Nhân Tông — presupposes a different but compatible philosophical anthropology: dependent origination (*duyên khởi*), compassion (*từ bi*), the soteriological possibility open to all beings, and a politics of non-coercion. What this *demands* of the state is non-interference in monastic life and ritual support. The court's relation to Buddhism — patronage of select monasteries (Thiên Mụ in Huế the most visible), regulation of ordinations, oversight of temple expansion — reflects accommodation within *tam giáo đồng nguyên*: Buddhism's philosophical commitments do not contest Confucian state-cosmology at the foundational level. Where Confucian *lễ* and Buddhist *từ bi* might appear to compete (the Confucian primacy of the family-political order versus the Buddhist soteriological commitment to all sentient beings), the Vietnamese tradition resolved the tension lay-and-village-side, with monks as community ritual specialists rather than as institutional rivals to the literati. Nguyễn Lang's *sử luận* (discursive history) makes clear that Buddhism's institutional contraction under court neglect was matched by a vital lay and village continuity that carried the tradition through the dynasty's century and a half (Nguyễn Lang, 1973–1992).

Folk religion as philosophical worldview

Đình (communal house), *chùa* (pagoda), *miếu* (shrine), *đạo Mẫu* (cult of Mother Goddesses), ancestor veneration, the village-festival calendar — these formed the densest carrier of *tam giáo đồng nguyên* in lived practice. Read philosophically, folk religion is not a residue or a survival but a coherent non-systematic philosophical anthropology of moral embeddedness: kin, village, ancestors, locality, and cosmic order entwined at the village altar in a single articulation. Buddhist rite, Daoist invocation, and Confucian propriety are not three separable ingredients in a folk mixture; they are the practical specifications of a single anthropocosmic vision (Tu, 1989; Phan Ngọc, 2002). During periods of economic instability — crop failure, heavy taxation, natural disaster — and when epidemics raged, villagers turned to folk rituals such as praying for rain, communal-house worship, or seeking ritual specialists, treating these as both spiritual and practical refuge. Annual festivals reinforced village solidarity, delineated social boundaries, and created support networks where the state system was overwhelmed. The court accommodated folk religion structurally because it could not have governed otherwise. Adriano di St. Thecla's account of village-level spirit cults, tutelary deities, and ancestor veneration, written half a century before the dynasty proper, confirms the empirical depth of folk-religious life on the eve of the Nguyễn restoration (Adriano di St. Thecla, 1750/2002).

Catholicism as philosophical worldview

Catholicism's distinctive features — centralized canon law, transnational loyalty to Rome, refusal of ancestor veneration, sacramental theology, and an exclusive soteriological claim — express a different philosophical anthropology entirely: the human as individual soul standing before a personal-transcendent God, with allegiance owed to a sacred authority outside the state. Read philosophically, Catholicism does not

merely compete with Confucian-Buddhist-folk religion at the level of belief; it introduces an alternative philosophical framework in which the state is not the visible instantiation of cosmic moral order but a temporal authority limited by a higher one. Cavanaugh helps name what is at stake: the modern category "religion" through which the conflict is usually narrated is anachronistic for the early-nineteenth-century Vietnamese case, and the Nguyễn-Catholic encounter is more accurately described as a contest between two political philosophies of community (Cavanaugh, 2009). That is why the Nguyễn response to Catholicism is over-determined philosophically: Catholicism is read simultaneously as religious-ritual challenge (refusal of ancestor veneration), as cultural challenge (the centralized canon law), as foreign-political challenge (the linkage with French and Spanish imperial reach), and as philosophical-anthropological challenge to the state's account of person and authority. The 1690 prohibition under the southern Nguyễn lords (Cooke, 2008) shows the philosophical logic of exclusion predates the dynasty proper: the same court could maintain genuine sympathy toward Catholicism in some periods *and* prohibit it under conditions of intra-Catholic disorder and perceived foreign linkage. The 1690 case is instructive because the prohibition did not lead to systematic persecution — internal Catholic dissension drove the immediate cause (Cooke, 2008: 383). The episode supplies the seventeenth-century antecedent for nineteenth-century postures: distinct postures (regulation in 1690, exclusion in the 1830s) coexist within a recurring grammar of state-Christianity relations.

Under *tam giáo đồng nguyên*, Confucianism, Buddhism, and folk religion sit on a continuum that admits accommodation as the philosophical default response. Catholicism sits *outside* that continuum because it presupposes a different philosophical anthropology — and that philosophical fact, not foreign-policy paranoia alone, makes intelligible the over-determined character of the Nguyễn response. The three-model typology applied in §5 is best understood as the typology of philosophical postures keyed to that distinction.

5. The three philosophical postures applied: Gia Long, Minh Mạng, Thiệu Trị, Tự Đức, and the protectorate transition

This is the analytical core of my paper. It applies the philosophically-reconceived three-model typology across the four reigns and the protectorate transition. The typology is now a typology of *philosophical postures*; the analysis reads each reign's edicts and policies for the philosophical commitments they presuppose.

Gia Long (1802–1820): accommodation, philosophically conditional

Gia Long's debt to French missionary support during the wars against the Tây Sơn — Pigneau de Béhaine the most visible figure — shaped a conciliatory stance toward Catholicism in the dynasty's earliest years. The famous remark to missionaries, captured in the draft, registers the personal-cum-philosophical register: *"Your religion is very good, but it is too strict, so no one can follow it. I cannot take only one wife"*. The remark is not a theological argument; it is a polite refusal of baptism that nevertheless registers a substantive philosophical claim — Catholic monogamy, read through the philosophical anthropology of the Vietnamese household and its ritual obligations, demanded a reorganization of family life the emperor judged unfit for general application. Toward Buddhism and folk religion, accommodation was the philosophical default under *tam giáo đồng nguyên*: imperial decrees granted patronage to specific pagodas; ancestral worship lands (*ruộng hương hỏa*) were allocated; the court engaged folk religion structurally because it could not have governed otherwise. Read philosophically, Gia Long's accommodation toward Catholicism was *pragmatic-conditional* (legitimacy after the Tây Sơn war, the Pigneau de Béhaine debt) rather than philosophically grounded. The deeper philosophical commitments of the Nguyễn state had not yet been forced into explicit conflict with Catholicism's competing

anthropology, and the accommodation was a policy that had not yet had to articulate itself.

Minh Mạng (1820–1841): philosophical control deepening into philosophical exclusion

Minh Mạng's reign is the analytical pivot. Confucianization intensifies (Woodside, 1971), and the court's posture toward Catholicism shifts from accommodation through control (registration requirements, restrictions on missionary movement, edicts of 1825 and 1832) to outright proscription (1833 and after). He praised the prohibition of religion in Japan and held that "two religions in one country are not good," while pragmatic constraints — the absence of a pretext, respect for Lê Văn Duyệt, and the instructions in Gia Long's will to maintain harmony with major religions — restrained him through the early 1820s (Nguyễn Quang Hưng, 2009). Ramsay (2008) supplies the most theoretically sharp Anglophone reading: Minh Mạng's anti-Catholic edicts were driven less by doctrinal hostility than by a state-security logic linking missionaries to French and Spanish imperial reach (Ramsay, 2008). The Lê Văn Khôi rebellion of 1833–35, in which Catholic involvement supplied the political pretext though the rebellion was not primarily Catholic in its base, marks the conjunctural turn that licensed Minh Mạng's outlawing edicts (Ramsay, 2008). We need to read Ramsay carefully and add a philosophical layer: Catholicism's transnational structure, refusal of ancestor veneration, and connection to French and Spanish imperial reach made it legible to the court not merely as a security threat but as a competing *philosophical anthropology* — one that subordinated the moral-cosmological order the state was committed to a higher transcendent authority. Toward Buddhism and folk religion, Minh Mạng exercised intensified control without exclusion: monastic registers were reorganized, temple expansion regulated, abbots appointed by imperial decree, and the number of monks and nuns verified. The philosophical reason for the difference is not contingent. Buddhism and folk religion's commitments did not contest the state's foundational anthropology; Catholicism's did. Buttinger's continuity reading — that there is "not much difference between Gia Long's passively hostile attitude towards Catholicism and Minh Mạng's measures that outlawed Catholicism" (Buttinger, 1958) — captures the philosophical-anthropological continuity of the Nguyễn posture even where the policies differ in severity. The state's underlying commitment remains constant: the moral-cosmological order grounded in Confucian *lễ* is the public form of legitimacy, and any tradition that demands subordination of that order to a higher transcendent authority will eventually face control if not exclusion.

Thiệu Trị (1841–1847): philosophical incoherence under pressure

Thiệu Trị's brief reign saw a partial relaxation of anti-Catholic edicts but also the Đà Nẵng incident of 1847, in which French naval action forced the court into a humiliating climb-down. The three-model typology is not exhaustive: Thiệu Trị's posture oscillates because the international context destabilizes the state's capacity to maintain any consistent *philosophical* posture. Read honestly, philosophical postures require political stability to be operationalized; under naval gunfire, posture collapses into reaction. The typology I operate with absorbs the case rather than being defeated by it: when the conditions of philosophical operationalization fail, posture-talk gives way to reaction-talk, and the typology itself becomes the framework against which the failure is intelligible.

Tự Đức (1848–1883): exclusion as fully articulated philosophical posture

Tự Đức's reign is the textbook case for the exclusion model. The edicts of 1851, 1855, and 1857 call for the expulsion or execution of foreign missionaries and the destruction of Catholic communities. Read philosophically, the language of the edicts articulates the philosophical-anthropological incompatibility explicitly: *"The religion of Jesus comes from the West: it does not worship ancestors and spirits, and it stupefies people with the doctrines of heaven, hell, and holy water. The proselytizers, although knowing*

that our national law does not tolerate such heresy, still preach about the Passion of Jesus, their Lord, enticing the ignorant who are ready to risk death without regret. What vulgarity! What a bizarre deception (...). The foundation of our civilization is the preservation of customs and traditions. These good customs are being threatened by the propagation of this beast-in-human-form heresy" (Nguyễn Quang Hưng, 2009; Nguyễn Ngọc Quỳnh, 2002). The philosophical claim is named explicitly: Catholicism's account of person and authority is incompatible with the state's account, and the policy follows from the philosophical claim. The 1857 Ministry of Justice (Bộ Hình) report on twenty-five captured Christians — six who voluntarily renounced their faith, one reluctantly, eighteen who refused, with ten more under active pursuit — registers the bureaucratic operationalization of exclusion at scale. The court's perception of foreign linkage — captured in the missionary intelligence reporting that the missionaries' actions and words "increasingly show that they are trying their utmost to lead the Government down the ruinous path they are following, which is the overthrow of Emperor Tự Đức" (Cao Huy Thuần, 2023) — was empirically grounded in significant cases, even if the generalization across the Catholic community was unfair to the substantial Vietnamese Catholic laity (Ramsay, 2008; Keith, 2012). The exclusion policy did not eradicate Catholicism but internationalized it, supplying France with the diplomatic pretext that culminated in the 1862 Treaty of Saigon and the dismemberment of Vietnamese sovereignty. Cavanaugh's *Myth of Religious Violence* helps frame the conflict as it actually was: a contest between two political philosophies of community, each with its own sacrificial logic, rather than religion-versus-secular-state in the modern Western sense (Cavanaugh, 2009).

The protectorate transition (1862 / 1884–1945): philosophical inversion under colonial imposition

With the French protectorate established progressively from 1862, religious policy was no longer the Nguyễn court's alone. The Treaty of Saigon's Article II — guaranteeing that "Citizens of France and Spain may practice the Christian religion in Annam and citizens of this country, regardless, may follow the Christian religion if they so desire and shall not be prevented, but no one shall be forced to become a Christian believer if they do not wish to" — registered the structural transformation in legal-institutional form. Cao Huy Thuần (2023) documents in detail how the "right to propagate the Christian religion" became an instrument for the broader French project of integrating Vietnam into European political-economic networks, with missionaries supplying geographic, linguistic, and ethnographic knowledge to the colonial state. The colonial state inverted the philosophical posture: Catholic protection was now imposed; Confucian ritual order was tolerated as cultural heritage but no longer underwrote sovereignty; Buddhism and folk religion were depoliticized. Asad's argument is directly applicable: the philosophical category through which the protectorate state engaged religion was a Western Christian-modern category, and the imposition of that category was itself a philosophical event (Asad, 2003). Keith's *Catholic Vietnam* shows that the inversion produced unexpected dynamics. Vietnamese Catholicism became simultaneously imperial-collaborator and seedbed of an emergent Vietnamese national consciousness, with race operating within Catholic life even as it organized colonial-ecclesiastical hierarchy (Keith, 2012: 3). The three-model framework still applies, but the relevant *state* — and its underlying philosophical commitments — has shifted. The structural transformation is not a continuation of Nguyễn-era policy under different administrators; it is a different philosophical event entirely, one in which a Western Christian-modern category of "religion" is operationalized over a Vietnamese cultural-political landscape that had not previously been organized in those terms.

Synthesis

The three philosophical postures track not a chronological sequence under each reign but a *differentiated* response keyed to (a) the philosophical compatibility of the religion in question with the state's account of person and authority, (b) the perceived security

threat, and (c) the international context. Accommodation worked for indigenous traditions because they sat within *tam giáo đồng nguyên* and shared, broadly, the state's philosophical anthropology. Control was reached toward those at the philosophical edge — Catholicism's institutional form had to conform to the Confucian-cosmological order, even where its doctrinal commitments could not. Exclusion was reached for Catholicism not because of doctrinal disagreement alone but because Catholicism alone was simultaneously a religious-ritual challenge, a cultural challenge, a foreign-political challenge, *and* a philosophical-anthropological challenge to the state's account of person and authority. The typology is differentiated, not chronological; the same court could and did adopt different postures simultaneously toward different traditions, and that is precisely what the philosophical reading explains.

6. Philosophical lessons for contemporary religious policy

This section translates the historical-philosophical analysis into philosophical lessons for contemporary Vietnamese — and comparative — thinking about state-religion relations. The register shifts from historical analysis to philosophical reflection grounded in policy, in five moves.

The contemporary frame

Vietnam's religious landscape has transformed. As of mid-2025, 43 religious organizations across 16 religions are recognized; believers number 27.7 million; clergy and lay officials have roughly doubled since 2003. The 2023 White Paper *Religion and Religious Policy in Vietnam* supplies the figures (Government Religious Affairs Committee, 2023). The post-2003 turn is anchored institutionally in Resolution 25-NQ/TW of the 7th Plenum of the 9th Party Central Committee (12 March 2003), which reframed religion from object of control to social resource for national construction (Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, 2003; Đỗ Quang Hưng, 2014). The 2016 Belief and Religion Law (Law No. 02/2016/QH14, in force from 1 January 2018) operationalized the reframing in transparent legal-procedural form — the elevation of the preceding 2004 Ordinance to statutory law marked a significant elevation in the Vietnamese legal hierarchy and articulated religious institutional autonomy within a regulated framework (National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2016). Read philosophically, Resolution 25 implicitly recognized what the Nguyễn experience demonstrates: the state's posture toward religion is itself a philosophical commitment that requires explicit articulation. The post-2003 turn is not a mere policy adjustment; it is the explicit articulation of a philosophical disposition.

Accommodation as philosophical disposition

The Gia Long experience demonstrates that accommodation, even when conditional and politically motivated, produces stability that exclusion cannot generate. The deeper philosophical lesson runs further. Vietnam's contemporary recognition of religious diversity — 43 organizations across 16 religions — is methodologically continuous with the older Vietnamese philosophical disposition of *tam giáo đồng nguyên*: pluralism as philosophical default, not as concession (Phan Ngọc, 2002; Vuong et al., 2018). Lương Kim Định's "An vi" frames this as a Vietnamese philosophical disposition with continuing relevance, and the cultural-additivity finding empirically confirms that the Vietnamese pattern has been to absorb rather than reject incoming traditions (Vuong et al., 2018). Read philosophically, contemporary recognition is not a Vietnamese borrowing of Western liberal religious freedom; it is an articulation in transparent legal form of a philosophical disposition Vietnam has long held in its own terms.

Engaging Western philosophical alternatives

Contemporary Vietnamese state-religion thinking must engage Western philosophical alternatives critically rather than ignore them or import them wholesale. **Rawls's** "idea of public reason" presupposes a liberal-procedural state that brackets comprehensive

doctrines — a stance Vietnam neither has historically operated within nor needs to adopt to ground its religious-policy framework. **Habermas's** post-secular dialogical translation is more compatible: it acknowledges religion as a legitimate voice in the informal public sphere, requires translation at the institutional threshold of formal political deliberation, and obliges secular citizens to take religious moral content seriously as potentially carrying semantic content not yet exhausted by secular reason (Habermas, 2006). The translation proviso is not a one-sided burden on religious citizens but a complementary learning process between religious and secular mentalities (Habermas, 2006). **Charles Taylor's** *A Secular Age* offers the most useful resource. The secular as one option within a modern social imaginary leaves room for a polity that is neither theocratic nor laicist but operates from a publicly shared moral background — a description that fits the Vietnamese contemporary situation better than either the French *laïcité* or the American First Amendment frame (Taylor, 2007). Vietnam, on this reading, occupies the immanent frame in Taylor's sense — a polity in which religion is one option among several rather than the default — without thereby being committed to exclusive humanism. The immanent frame can be inhabited "open" toward transcendence rather than "closed" into doctrinaire materialism, and the post-2003 framework is compatible with the open inhabitation. Asad's caution remains operative: the very category "religion" through which the dialogue is conducted is itself a Western Christian-modern formation, and Vietnamese intellectual life had no exact equivalent to the Latin term *religio* (Asad, 2003; Vuong et al., 2018). The dialogue therefore proceeds with mutual translation — Western philosophical apparatus translated into Vietnamese conceptual terms, Vietnamese inheritance translated into vocabularies international scholarship can hear.

The Confucian-Vietnamese alternative as philosophical resource

Sungmoon Kim's *Public Reason Confucianism* argues that a Confucian polity does not need Rawlsian neutrality; it can ground state-religion relations in a publicly shared moral-cosmological background without violating defensible standards of legitimacy. Read in dialogue with **Trần Đình Hượu's** treatment of Vietnamese tradition-modernity transition (Trần Đình Hượu, 1996) and **Phan Ngọc's** account of *tam giáo đồng nguyên* (Phan Ngọc, 2002), the post-2003 framework can be philosophically grounded in *Vietnamese* terms. The 13th Party Congress's "religion as resource" formulation, on this reading, is not an ad hoc policy choice but the articulation of a philosophical disposition continuous with the deeper Vietnamese tradition. The 13th Congress documents themselves articulate the position. Religion is to be engaged not as an object of management but as a contributor to national construction: *"Promoting the good cultural and moral values and resources of religions for national development. Resolutely fighting against and strictly punishing those who exploit religion to oppose the Party, the State, and the socialist regime; dividing and undermining religious unity and the great national unity"* (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021). Read philosophically, the formulation operationalizes the philosophical disposition of *tam giáo đồng nguyên* — pluralism as default, with the state's prior philosophical commitments to *đại đoàn kết toàn dân tộc* (great national unity) framing the recognition. Đỗ Quang Hưng's *Nhà nước thế tục* (2021) supplies the most comprehensive Vietnamese-internal theoretical articulation: Vietnam is, on his reading, a *qualified* secular state — neither Western-liberal "wall of separation" nor militantly anti-religious laïcité, but a state that recognizes religious institutional autonomy within a legal framework grounded in Resolution 25-NQ/TW (Đỗ Quang Hưng, 2021). His paired earlier monograph *Nhà nước, Tôn giáo, Pháp luật* (2014) articulates the legal-policy framework in detail (Đỗ Quang Hưng, 2014). The substantive contribution functions as a Vietnamese theoretical voice in a debate that has been almost entirely conducted in Western terms.

The empirical material illustrates the philosophical claim concretely. Religious-affiliated education includes 269 kindergartens, 905 independent classes, and twelve vocational schools providing trade qualifications to thousands of trainees annually; 283 medical clinics serve approximately 1.5 million patient visits per year; 113 social-protection establishments care for approximately 12,000 vulnerable persons including orphans, persons with disabilities, and the elderly without family support (Government Religious Affairs Committee, 2023; Nguyễn Hồng Dương, 2014). These figures illustrate the philosophical claim that religion functions as substantive contribution to national life — religion as resource in a substantive philosophical sense, not merely as policy slogan.

The methodological-philosophical caveat

The Nguyễn court's control mechanisms — registration, oversight, edicts — were administrative-arbitrary rather than legal-procedural. The contemporary contrast is the rule-of-law framework: the 2016 Belief and Religion Law, the 2017 implementing Decree 162/2017/NĐ-CP, and subsequent regulatory instruments (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2017). Read philosophically, the contemporary framework operationalizes the philosophical disposition of *tam giáo đồng nguyên* — accommodation as default — within transparent legal form. The substantive philosophical advance over the Nguyễn approach is not the disposition itself (which has deep Vietnamese roots) but its explicit articulation in legal-procedural rather than administrative-arbitrary form. The Tự Đức exclusion lesson is *philosophical*: a state that responds to religious otherness by exclusion under perceived foreign-linkage threat tends to produce the very philosophical-political instability it seeks to prevent. The exclusion did not eradicate Catholicism; it internationalized it and supplied the diplomatic pretext for the 1862 Treaty of Saigon.

A critical handling note belongs here. I do not equate any current Vietnamese policy with Tự Đức's exclusion. The argument operates at the level of philosophical pattern, not substance. Contemporary Vietnamese policy has substantively moved beyond the Nguyễn-era patterns, and the reading registers that move philosophically rather than reducing it to administrative continuity. These are lessons of philosophical *pattern*, not of substance. Also, my paper does not propose nostalgic restoration of any Nguyễn-era arrangement; it argues that the *philosophical form* of accommodation-within-legal-framework, grounded in *tam giáo đồng nguyên*, has been validated across two centuries of Vietnamese state-religion experience and provides a resource for comparative philosophical thinking. Productive complementarity, not opposition, is the distinctive Vietnamese-context contribution I aim to highlight here: the post-2003 framework, the Vietnamese philosophical inheritance, and international philosophical interlocutors function as partners rather than as competitors.

7. Conclusion

The argument can be drawn to a close in three philosophical implications and a brief gesture toward future research.

The first is **descriptive-philosophical**. The Nguyễn case shows that state-religion relations under a Confucian monarchy facing foreign challenge instantiate three differentiated philosophical postures — accommodation, control, exclusion — keyed to philosophical-anthropological compatibility, perceived security threat, and international context. The pattern is universal in philosophical form but Vietnamese in instantiation, with Confucianism functioning as both "national religion" and governing technique within a partially operative *tam giáo đồng nguyên* frame (Tu, 1989; Phan Ngọc, 2002; Trần Đình Hượu, 1996). The typology is differentiated, not chronological: the same court adopted different postures simultaneously toward different traditions.

The second is **evaluative-philosophical**. Accommodation grounded in an explicit philosophical disposition produces stability; control as administrative-arbitrary practice

produces short-term order at the cost of long-term legitimacy; exclusion under perceived threat produces long-term instability — a pattern visible across the four Nguyễn reigns and across the post-1986 reform consensus (Đỗ Quang Hưng, 2014; 2021). The philosophical lesson is that a state's relation to religion is most stable when its philosophical commitments are made explicit and operationalized in transparent legal-procedural form. The post-2003 turn (Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, 2003; National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2016; Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021) operationalizes that lesson institutionally. The substantive philosophical advance is not the disposition — which has deep Vietnamese roots — but its explicit legal-procedural articulation.

The third is the **comparative-philosophical contribution**. The Vietnamese case adds something distinctive to comparative philosophy of religion. It shows that the universal question of state and religious otherness can be answered *within* a non-Western religious-pluralism frame — *tam giáo đồng nguyên* — and produce both deep accommodation toward indigenous traditions and severe exclusion at the boundary, without the contradiction that a Rawlsian or Habermasian frame would predict. The case complicates the standard Western philosophy-of-religion frame by showing that "the public sphere" in which religion operates can be Confucian-cosmological rather than post-Christian (Tu, 1989; Vuong et al., 2018). Taylor's *A Secular Age* provides the most receptive Western frame; Kim's *Public Reason Confucianism* the closest East Asian parallel; Trần Đình Hượu and Phan Ngọc the Vietnamese-internal voices that the Anglophone literature has not yet adequately heard. My paper does not displace the Habermasian post-secular framework or the Taylorian secular-age framework; it complicates them productively with a Vietnamese voice (Cavanaugh, 2009; Asad, 2003). But I also wish to open the philosophical horizon that reveals the broader question, namely whether *tam giáo đồng nguyên* can be developed as a contemporary Vietnamese contribution to comparative philosophy of religion alongside Taylor's secular age and Kim's public-reason Confucianism. Vietnam's church-state-philosophical settlement is not a deficient instance of Western liberal secularization. It is a worked Vietnamese answer to a universal philosophical question, and it is intelligible philosophically only as such.

Declaration on AI Use

AI-assisted tools (including Grammarly and Gemini 3) were used during manuscript preparation for initial brainstorming, annotated outline suggestions, language editing and refinement. The author takes full responsibility for the content, interpretation, and integrity of the research.

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