

# Theophane Venard and Ho Chi Minh

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*Summary: Traces the French involvement in Vietnam through the lives of the 19th century missionary Venard and the political leader Ho Chi Minh. Admits it is hard to clearly see complex historical issues where faith, persecution, power, and economics intermingle. Keywords: war (DDLW #667).*

What are the issues that most absorb the country this month? There is mounting unemployment. There is the threat of Indo-China becoming another Korea, and a debate as to whether or not American troops are going in; and there is the McCarthy-Army game being played over the television. And the latter seems to be taking up most of people's time. Like the World Series it is a play which fascinates and absorbs. The library at St. Joseph's house is filled all day from ten thirty until almost one, and from two thirty until five, with a watching group. It is a grim game being played for rank and reputation. Both sides claim an equal hatred of Communism and an equal zeal in rooting it out. And both sides equally ignore the spectacle they are making for the world. It is frankly, a picture of two men trying to ruin each other. A grim struggle, most publicly played. And it is as fascinating to the men in our library, as the prize fights which go on at night, and not much more subtle.

## Eight Year

While this game is being played, between Secretary Stevens and Senator McCarthy, the drama of Indo-China is going on. Today as I write the fort of Dien Bien Phu is still being besieged with some ten thousand of the Foreign Legion, (and one woman nurse), by the Communist forces of Ho Chi Minh. This is the eighth year of this war and we pray a truce is imminent. As it is, in June the monsoons with the floods of rain will make roads impassable and will for a time make intervention impossible. The rains will go on until October, so there is the next six months to consider the situation, to learn more about it.

## History

History read from the Catholic sense of values is rather different from history as reported. It digs deeper, gets more down to the roots, and makes the problems more complicated. Here is a thumbnail sketch of Indo-China which is made up of Tonkin, Annam, Cambodia, Cochinchina and Laos. Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina are all three together called Viet

Nam or French Indo-China. The Wall Street Journal calls it a rich storehouse of rubber, rice, minerals. Local industrial development is forbidden and there is forced labor. All writers—and I have read half dozen books on the subject—agree that the population in this rich country could live on about twenty day's work a year but the rubber plantations put in by the conquering French, have to be worked and cheap labor is essential. According to an article in the National Geographic in 1935, Saigon was the rubber capital of the world. "The cow submits to milking machines, but the rubber tree does not, and like the cow it must be milked regularly or go dry... Indo-China has not only the proper equatorial rain belt climate, but the workers, each of whom collects the sap from 200-400 trees a day and receives 40 cents for his labor. The best rubber gatherers come from Tonkin... American interests control only three per cent of the plantations, but one-third of the supply goes to Akron, Ohio."

## Great Genius

Back in 1662 the Jesuits entered this area with great success and spoke highly of the native population. There had already been a great civilization there of the Khmers, a mighty nation, the offspring of the aboriginal tribes of Indo-China, and an invading race from the Central Asian plateaus who brought Sanskrit and Brahmanism with them. They built magnificent temples and showed great genius and intelligence. Somerset Maugham said that one of the temples was so vast that all the ruins of Greece could be put inside it. For a hundred miles these gigantic carved temples and monuments, greater than the pyramids, are being disrupted and overthrown by the jungle. In every travel book there are descriptions of the abandoned city of the jungle, Angkor Wat.

Most people think in terms of the French invasion of Indo-China as beginning in 1858, but those who know the story of Blessed Theophane Venard go back to 1852 when Fr. Theophane was ordained at the age of 22 for "Annam—Land of Martyrdoms." There had already been a number of martyrdoms in Indo-China, and the hatred of the foreigners might be traced to the conduct of the British in China. Indo-China had been dominated by India and China, as the name implies, but mostly by China for the past thousand years. It is no new thing, this Chinese domination.

"Those who call themselves Christians spoiled God's work wherever they went," Theophane wrote to his family. And he tells of the opium trade, foisted on the Chinese by the British for profit.

"The papers tell of the wonderful things the British and French are doing for Christianity," he writes. "Pure fiction. The governments of today (1852) have become godless and secular... Expediency is the rule."

Undoubtedly if such was written today, the McCarthy committee would start an investigation into the communist influences over the missionaries.

## Martyrdom

From the time Theophane Venard was nine years old, tending goats on his father's farm in France, he had wanted to go to Tonkin. Fortunately for us, we have enough of his letters to his family to get a very clear view of his life. He was so appealing a figure that St. Therese, the Little Flower, called him her favorite saint and martyr. He was young, full of love for his family, and a gaiety which won all hearts. His martyrdom lasted for eight years, until he was finally beheaded at the age of thirty. There is a book written about him, called **A Modern Martyr** by Most Rev. James Anthony Walsh, co-founder of Maryknoll, and recently republished by McMillen Books, in New York. In the first chapter of this book the statement is made that Theophane's letters, read to the students at St. John's seminary in Brighton, Massachusetts, "kindled the spark that grew into a flame and started a movement which in time brought about the missionary order of Maryknoll."

## Smuggled

According to this account a terrible persecution was raging in Tonkin and there was a price on the head of every missionary, and yet Christianity was growing. There were 150,000 Christians, 80 Annamese priests, 600 native sisters, 1200 catechists and 300 seminarians. Theophane was smuggled into the country in a Chinese junk from Hongkong where he had been studying the language for a year. He writes to his father: "You must remember that the Annamese have a civilization equal to our own in Europe. In fact, in some respects they surpass us. Their physicians have a genuine skill."

At that time the Bishop himself lived in a poor house half wood and half mud, with a thatched roof, and the houses around were all of the same kind. The churches were not much better, a straw roof upheld by wooden pillars. "Right now it is hardly worth while constructing any but temporary buildings because of the recurring bursts of persecution." (Missionaries throughout the world today, please note.)

## Extortion

For the next eight years the life of the faith went on in a country where the mandarins, in extorting money from the poor, made life miserable for the Christians too who over and over again gave them all their material goods and started anew. During the rainy season the Bishop and his priests paddled themselves around the flooded territory in one-man boats made of bamboo. They hid out in the mountains, lived in caves, went from village to village, slept in the open. Theophane continued his work, in constant illness, with one lung gone, he survived an attack of typhoid fever, he lived through famine and flood, and through it all he kept his spirits and his cheerfulness.

It is an amazing story of hardship heroically endured.

But even a saint will cry out at times. By now the French were beginning to make a move to take over, and Theophane reports sadly that in April 1860, "the French seemed to have

withdrawn from the country altogether. This move has baffled everyone. We had hoped to be delivered from this terrible situation, but it is better for us to put our hope in God and He will deliver us in his own good time.”

But later on when he was imprisoned in a wooden cage and taken before Mandarins and officials to be questioned about the war of the French against the Vietnam, he said that he and his Bishop Fetord, would a thousand times rather give up their lives than in any way be instrumental in the shedding of blood.

## **Clothes And All**

He was beheaded after months of questioning, and his death in a way reminds one of St. Thomas More, so light hearted and generous he was to his captors. The executioner took the job in order to get the clothes the prisoner wore and that evidently was his only pay, so he asked Theophane to take them off so that he would get them, unsoiled with blood. This Theophane obligingly did for him, standing there only in his one undergarment.

## **French Education**

With the French conquering this country, even such leaders as Ho Chi Minh and Bao Dai went to France to receive their education. Ho Chi Minh was the son of a scholar of peasant stock and he began his revolutionary activities at the age of eight as a courier in the Viet Nam movement. When his family was jailed in 1911 he shipped out as a seaman to France and lived there for the next twelve years. He was the organizer of a group called the Inter Colonial Union, edited a paper called **Pariah**, and was a founding member of the Communist party; in 1923 he went to Moscow, and in 1924 to Canton and organized the Association of the Suppressed Asian peoples. He was then 34 years old. In 1937 when Japan invaded China, he offered to make common cause with France but France refused and they in turn helped the Japanese fight the guerrillas. During World War II the Japanese took over the country and the French officials remained, part of the Vichy government, and Bao Dai, who had also spent ten years in France studying, and was a descendant of the royal family, was in the palace. At the close of the war when the Japanese surrendered and the French colonials fled, Ho set up the republic of Viet Nam and signed a treaty with France in March 1946 which recognized Viet Nam as a free state within the French Union.

## **Colonials**

It was the French colonials rather than France itself which revived the war. In December, 1946, Ho fled to the hills and for the past eight years he has held the land while the French held the cities. There has been a saying also, quoted by the National Geographic as well as by communists that during the day the French hold the cities but at night Ho takes them back.

It is said by some authorities that Ngo Dinh Diem a Catholic layman, head of the Catholic League, former premier who resigned under Bao Dai is, with many other Catholics, sympathetic to Viet Minh's side, and the Catholics are now numbered in the millions.

## Single Eye

It is hard to see things with a pure heart, with a single eye, as a Christian should. Christ surely came to bring a sword. It certainly is not a simple matter, this affair of Indo China, which we see through the eyes of the saints as well as from the naturally good standpoint. All men are our brothers. All men seek that which is good, love, fame and fortune, and often these two aims cross, as in the case of the French who went to Indo-China to civilize, to convert, and to develop it.

It is a story familiar to those who have read the letters of St. Teresa of Avila, who wrote to her colonizing brothers who went to the new world, piously to bring the faith, but also to make their fortune, very frankly expressed. The great St. Teresa was only too thankful for the money her brothers gave her when she was setting up her new foundations. One can well see how the Marxists would read this history, and the kind of emphasis they would place on it. And in so many ways their criticism is true. It is their means to attain their ends of brotherhood that are wrong. Just as our means too, are often wrong.

## To Suffer With

One can well suffer with a Theophane Venard as he lay for days in his mud hut in hiding from his pursuers, racked by fever, witnessing the tortures of this confreres, and even on one occasion of a group of nuns who had sheltered him and his bishop. They were chained with heavy chains which dragged their necks to their knees. They were put in stocks and insects devoured them, they were burned with red hot pincers which tore the flesh from their bones, they were slowly dismembered till there was nothing left but the bleeding trunks of men. They were lucky when they were only beheaded as Theophane was. One can well understand the longing for the rescuer. Who would not cry out in the midst of such suffering, even knowing as Theophane did in his clear moments that these French, these British liberators, brought also grave evils with them, of forced labor, of torture too, and imprisonment, and the Godlessness of our western materialism.

There is always the tension between Church and State and it is always a three-way conflict for most Christians. The arms follow the cross and with the arms go such means as obliteration bombing during the war to wipe out opposition, and after the war birth control and abortion clinics to further decimate the subjugated to whom we do not open our doors. On the surface one sees the gallantry of the beleaguered troupes at Dien Bien Phu and all that is best and is **natural**, is the immediate instinct to rescue. One sees the persecution of the faith in all the Communist-dominated countries, and religion is only permitted if it is subordinated to the State, the dictatorship of the totalitarian state.

But when the talk is of defending the faith against communism, we must remember too Yugo Slavia, also communist, also persecuting religion but standing alone and not a part of a power block which threatens our supremacy in the world. And her too we aid. We are going to be forced sooner or later to be facing the ultimate issues. To recognize that it is not Christianity and freedom we are defending, but our possessions. And in saving our lives, as we think, we are assuredly going to lose them. It is the poor of the world, it is the exploited, it is the dominated, that will conquer.