

HÀN MẶC TỬ (1912 – 1940):

A New Moon for the Season of the New Evangelization in Vietnamese Catholicism

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Abstract

Since its arrival to Vietnam, Catholicism has often been known or accused as either heterodox religion or religion of superstition. Efforts to inculturate the Christian faith into Vietnamese cultures have begun from early missionaries in Vietnam in the early seventeenth century to church leadership in Vietnam today. At the early twentieth century, the poetry of Hàn Mặc Tử (1912 – 1940) has demonstrated a new level of inculturation where the Christian faith no longer remains at the level of “superficial adaptation” but has become a principle that animates, directs, and unifies Vietnamese cultures, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about a new creation. Therefore, Hàn’s works can serve as source of inspiration and example for the New Evangelization in the Vietnamese Catholic Church today.

Keywords

Inculturation, Vietnamese Catholic Church, Vietnamese literature

About the Author

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I humbly beseech you, my Lord Jesus
 To pour down your grace on the union of springs and my poetry,
 To forgive me for having offended you with my sinful verses,
 From the hand of the poet who drew on the moon,
 In numerous anxious nights wrestling in the standing water of Eternal River.

Hàn Mặc Tử, “*Đêm xuân cầu nguyện*” [Praying on a Spring Night]

Catholicism was first known to the Vietnamese as *Đạo Hoa Lang* – the religion or the way of Portuguese (de Rhodes 25). To become a Catholic, it was understood that one had to cease being a Vietnamese and somehow to be reborn as a foreigner literally.¹ Consequently, for more than four hundred years since its arrival to Vietnam, Catholicism has often been condemned as either *tả đạo* [“a heterodox religion”]² or *dị đoan chi giáo*³ [“religion of superstition”] (*Hội Đồng Tứ Giáo* 13), both of which implied that it served as tools used by foreigners to exploit the country. Catholics were often seen as “spies” who collaborated with foreign powers and caused harm to the country’s welfare. Catholicism was considered as a threat to national safety and stability (*Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư*).³ In fact, such accusation and condemnation against Catholicism have served as one of the main reasons to justify what had seemed to be an endless persecution of Catholics since its arrival to Vietnam.⁴ Thus one of the most urgent issues confronting Vietnamese Catholics constantly involves how to maintain the integrity of the Catholic faith and remain faithful to their cultural heritage. In other words, has Catholicism remained an “outsider” of Vietnamese society or has it identified itself with the country’s struggle and achievement, so as to become part of national identity?

There have been many attempts among foreign missionaries and Vietnamese Christians to integrate the Christian faith into Vietnamese cultures and vice versa. Among them, the life and poetry of Hàn Mặc Tử (1912-1942), arguably the most prominent and the first Vietnamese Catholic modern poet, offers a concrete example of how Christian faith and Vietnamese cultures can meet in such a way that both found a home in both Christianity and Vietnamese society from a Vietnamese perspective. This essay argues that how Hàn faithfully integrated Catholicism into Vietnamese cultures in his poetry can serve as a model, a “new moon” for “New Evangelization” in Vietnamese Catholicism today. Its argument is divided into two parts. The first studies the various forms by which Catholicism has been accused as a foreign religion and thus a threat to Vietnam’s national well-being, and the corresponding ways Catholics have responded to this accusation. The second shows how the writings of Hàn Mặc Tử, arguably the first Catholic poet whose works have become part of the standard of Vietnamese literature, serve as a model of how to inculturate the Christian faith into Vietnamese cultures today.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE DYNAMICS BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND VIETNAMESE SOCIETY

Throughout Vietnamese history, regimes together with their ideology and rhetoric have changed. Yet suspicion towards Christians as foreign collaborators harmful to Vietnam's national well-being and interest persist. In fact, this suspicion is one cause underlying the tension between the Church and Vietnam's current communist government. From the 1954 partition of Vietnam onward, 700,000 Catholics including 615 priests and 5 bishops fled the communist regime in the North and moved to the pro-Western government in the South. For the North, this mass exodus once again confirmed the communist regime's fear and suspicion that the Catholic Church had close ties with those regarded as "agents of imperialism" at that time, namely, the French and the Vatican (Denney 270-295). Subsequently the Liason Committee of Patriotic and Peace-loving Catholics (LCPPC) was established during a conference held in Hanoi on 8-11 March 1955 and aimed at "freeing Vietnamese Catholics from the influence of imperialism in order to restore dignity to the Fatherland and the nation" (Denney 273).

Such a highly suspicious and negative perspective against the Church in Vietnam continued after the 1976 reunification of North and South Vietnam under communism. Church activities were limited, priests detained, religious properties confiscated. All were done with the purpose of protecting national interest against "imperialists and reactionaries" in defense of the socialist regime. Change came in December 1986, during the Sixth Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party when the newly selected Secretary General, Nguyễn Văn Linh, insisted that "Catholics should no longer be treated as outsiders" (Denney 285).

The *Đổi Mới*, the economic reform policy similar to the Soviet *perestroika* promulgated in 1989, led to more openness in governmental policies on religious freedom and practices. In fact, the Seventh Plenum of the Ninth Party Central Committee on Religion-Oriented Statements in March 2003 claimed for the first time that "religious beliefs are part of the national unity block" (M. Nguyen, *Religious Issues and Government Policies in Vietnam* 244). For the Catholic Church, such a surprising statement from the Central Party demonstrated an emergence of a new generation of communist leaders who no longer perceived it as a threat to national security. Instead, these leaders further recognized that the Catholic Church "has been and can certainly be a powerful and irreplaceable ally in the promotion of economic well-being and social justice for all" (P. Phan, "The Roman Catholic Church" 243-257). Given this new political climate, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam (CBCV) in dialogue with the Federation Asian Bishops'

Conference (FABC) exhorted all Vietnamese Catholics to be involved in the three-year plan for “New Evangelization” starting in 2014.

One of the major tasks of this “New Evangelization” is the urgent need of inculturating the Christian faith into Vietnamese cultures. According to the CBCV’s pastoral letter to the whole Church in Vietnam issued in October 2013, the “light of the Christian faith not only enlightens the internal life of the Church, . . . but also enables all the faithful to develop the present society towards a future of hope” (“Pastoral Letter” 3). Therefore part of the New Evangelization agenda entails an “effort to research for appropriate [cultural] expressions and to apply them to the profession of the Christian faith in such a way that people today can understand and receive the message of the Gospel”(4). However, the Bishops’ letter called the Church first and foremost to engage herself into a process of self-reflection and self-examination before involving herself with others (3). And one of the issues in this process remains the relationship between the Church and Vietnamese government.

Ignorance and prejudice that led to attacks on and persecution of Catholics during the long history of tension and conflicts between the Church and Vietnam’s political authority and power—whether the leaders were vested power by past feudal kings and royal courts or present communist leaders of the socialist government—were not without reason. History shows that the failure to inculturate the Christian faith into Vietnamese cultures easily made the Catholic Church, with its governance and authority outside the state’s political jurisdiction and geographical boundary, appear as a privileged or dangerous outsider. Some of the earlier Jesuit missionaries in Vietnam had anticipated the consequences of such a failure. Thus they strove to implement various means of adaptation and accommodation in their preaching and teaching among Vietnamese Catholic communities.

Back in the 17th century, in a letter to his superior, Francisco de Pina complained that other Jesuits’ inability to master Vietnamese undermined their mission of propagating the Christian faith in Vietnam (Dror 26). Conscious of the incomparable effectivity of teaching Christian doctrine in Vietnamese, de Rhodes memorized the language by heart (de Rhodes 73). The work of these Jesuits missionaries gave birth to *chữ Quốc ngữ*, the modern Vietnamese script. De Rhodes’s 1651 *Cathechismus* was the first publication in the current national script. Girolamo Maiorica’s writings in *chữ Nôm*, a demotic script widely used by Vietnamese intellectuals in place of Chinese from the 15th to the 19th century reached the hearts and minds of Vietnam’s cultured elites (Obstrowski). These Jesuit catechetical materials, baptismal formulas, devotional prayers, letters, and dictionaries which were written either in *chữ Quốc ngữ* or *chữ Nôm* marked the beginning of Vietnamese Christian literature.

Furthermore, Jesuit preaching and teaching aimed at demonstrating the universality of Catholicism, thus refuting her image as a “religion of the Portuguese” or a “religion of superstitions.” In order to correct the accompanying misinterpretation of what becoming a Christian demanded of the Vietnamese, de Rhodes asked his audiences not to “say that ‘this religion [Christianity] is the way of the Portuguese [exclusively].’” Using his profound knowledge of Vietnamese cultures and language, he compared God to “the sun whose light shines upon different kingdoms at different times. While some are in the light, others remain in darkness. Therefore, no kingdom can exclusively claim the sun for its own” (de Rhodes 25). Thus the light of God shines on all peoples and Catholicism belongs to all kingdoms.

These efforts to cultivate Catholicism in Vietnam were not limited to foreign missionaries. In 1796, Fr. Philip Binh, a learned Confucianist knowledgeable in both Vietnamese and Western cultures, went with a group of priests and catechists to Portugal in order to petition the Portuguese king to present their plea to Rome for the return of the Jesuits to Vietnam. While awaiting official response from Lisbon until his death (possibly in 1826), he wrote materials for devotional purposes (morning and evening prayers, reflection on the Eucharist, lives of the saints) and for pastoral instruction (history of popes, guidelines of Christian communities, personal stories on various trips in Asia and in Europe) (Binh xii-xiv). These texts in Vietnamese romanized script represented an important step in the advancement of Catholicism in Vietnam. Fr. Binh’s life and works articulated his encounter with Catholic doctrine and history as well as his personal experience in Europe from a Vietnamese perspective and thus demonstrated how deeply Catholicism could take root in the native intellectual ethos.

Despite these efforts however, there was no complete vocabulary in Vietnamese: native words and expressions could not fully capture and communicate the meaning of different Catholic concepts and doctrines. Various factors account for this inadequacy. First, Catholic materials published between the 17th and 19th century were written in then still little-known romanized script and thus were used almost exclusively by and for Christians. Second, they were circulated in secret within the Catholic community because of the ongoing persecutions. As a result, these texts had no exposure to and interaction with Vietnam’s mainstream literature. Vietnamese Catholic literature then remained underdeveloped in both conceptual depth and literary expression. In other words, Catholicism remained at a level of “superficial adaptation” and thus the “Vietnamese people had not been able to grapple with the Christian faith to the degree that they could be inspired enough to create suitable words for it” (Võ, *Lịch Sử Văn Học Công Giáo Việt Nam* 50).

However, towards the end of the 19th century, Catholicism began to extend further into the wider Vietnamese society. As French colonial power consolidated control over the country, the status of Christianity rose among the country's other religious traditions. The romanized script, now endorsed by the French government, eventually replaced the Chinese characters (*chữ Hán*) and the demotic script (*chữ Nôm*) and became Vietnam's national script (*chữ Quốc ngữ*) (P. Phan, *Mission and Catechesis* 34).

As persecution ended, Catholics interacted enthusiastically and openly with Vietnam's mainstream religions and cultures. As a result, Catholicism provided new themes and ideas to inspire Vietnamese poets and writers. Vietnamese Catholic literature continued to improve, to be freely published and widely distributed. Catholic moral teachings were incorporated into Vietnamese songs and stories. Biblical figures, Catholic saints, and famous Vietnamese Catholics were studied and written about in Vietnam's national script as well as new editions of earlier works (Thanh Lang 22).

Most importantly, all of the Catholic works at the beginning of the 20th century were studied and reinterpreted in Vietnamese terms. For example, King David of the Hebrew Bible was portrayed as a Vietnamese king who presided over the imperial court of Huế, and his wife as a traditional Vietnamese lady who conformed to Confucian teachings and principles. The Virgin Mary was redrawn as a graceful, responsible and capable Vietnamese woman. The passion of Jesus Christ was told in Vietnamese prose for the first time (Thanh Lang 25).

In addition to these traditional Christian materials that were developed and published in ways that would be familiar to the Vietnamese people, modern Vietnamese writers and poets began to explore Catholicism and lives of the faithful as themes for their novels and poetry. In doing so, they both modernized Catholicism in Vietnam and introduced it to mainstream culture. Among Vietnam's modern poets, Hàn Mặc Tử (1912 – 1940) undoubtedly was a pioneer. Being a layman and native Vietnamese, Hàn's poetry and other writings showed brilliant creativity, reshaping Christian themes such as human suffering, God, the Incarnation, and Christian prayers into the Vietnamese language and context from a native Vietnamese Catholic. His vibrant poetic expressions of Christian faith not only enriched the treasure of Vietnamese literature, but also have served as inspiration for many generations of poets and theologians to come. I would argue that Hàn's example of *both* daring creativity in his use of Vietnamese language *and* profound experience of faith serves as a source of inspiration, a "new moon" for the New Evangelization in Vietnam today.

HÀN MẶC TỬ: CHRISTIAN AND VIETNAMESE

In this second part of the essay, I will explore Hàn Mặc Tử's various poems specifically focusing on how he creatively utilized various images and expressions rooted in Vietnamese cultures to articulate certain understanding of Christian anthropology and eschatology. Furthermore, through Hàn's re-imagination and re-interpretation of certain scriptural texts, particularly, that of the Birth of Jesus Christ, using cultural concepts and categories at home with Vietnamese, a new stage of inculturation has dawned in Vietnamese Catholicism. No longer remained at the level of "superficial adaptation," Christian faith has "become a principle that animates, directs, and unifies [Vietnamese] culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about a 'new creation'" (Starkloff 66-81).

THE POET: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Hàn Mặc Tử's original name was Nguyễn Trọng Trí. He was born on September 22, 1912 in Đồng Hới (today Quảng Bình, Central Vietnam), and was the fourth of six children. His parents, father Nguyễn Văn Toàn and mother Nguyễn Thị Duy, named their children, *Nhân* (humanness), *Nghĩa* (righteousness), *Lễ* (propriety), *Trí* (wisdom), *Tín* (trustworthiness) and *Hiếu* (filial piety) – all of which reflect the deep Confucian values embraced by the family.

Both sides of Hàn's family were Catholic. After fleeing Thanh Hóa, his great-grandfather Phạm Bôi helped Cố Đồng (Father Đồng) build the Thanh Tân church. Cố Đồng helped Hàn's father to change his name and enter the seminary (Ba Tinh 13). According to his younger brother's account, Hàn was baptized a Catholic adopting Peter as his baptismal name. Later he chose Francis Xavier as his confirmation name⁵ (12). Before his marriage, Hàn's father also spent a few years in the seminary (13-14). Thus, Hàn's family was deeply grounded in both Catholicism and Confucianism.

What Hàn's family underwent illustrated how the Vietnamese people, especially those who belonged to the elite group or the royal court, had to wrestle with social, political, and religious tensions and crises during Vietnam's transitions from feudal society to colonized territory, from a traditional Asian to a Western-influenced ethos during the early twentieth century. Yet such tensions and crises also opened opportunities for creativity and transformation. His father's family flight from Thanh Hóa (North Vietnam) to Đồng Hới (Central Vietnam) was necessary because Hàn's great grandfather Phạm Bôi was involved in the anti-French Cần Vương movement, and thus later changed his last name from Phạm to Nguyễn to avoid detection by the French-supported government. Hàn's mother originally came from Quảng Nam (Central Vietnam) and was a descendant of Nguyễn Long, the imperial doctor

(*Ngư Y*) of King Tự Đức (1848-1858) and a member of the Vietnamese delegation led by Phan Thanh Giản, who signed the peace accord with France in 1862. After France finally overtook the Vietnamese imperial court, Nguyễn was executed like many other royal court officials (Chế, “Hàn Mặc Tử anh là ai?” 14-15).

Hàn’s brief life was characterized by these great social tensions and at times tragic consequences as well as by creativity and even genius. His childhood, which marked by a lot of moving from places to places in central Vietnam due to his father’s work as the director of commerce in Nhật Lệ, Quảng Ngãi, had left a profound impression on him. Fond memories of time spent with his sister along the beach were a source of inspiration for his later work, “*Chơi giữa mùa trăng*” (“Playing under the Full Moon”). In “*Bến Hàn Giang*” (“Hàn Giang Shore”), he expressed the reflective melancholy of a young soul searching for life’s meaning in the midst of change and the intense grief felt by a tender heart mourning the death of his father.

When the family settled in Qui Nhơn in 1926, the young Hàn formally began to write poetry under the tutelage and encouragement of his eldest brother. Like most poets then, he composed all his poems according to the “seven words and eight verses” rule of *Đường* (Tang) poetry⁶ taking Minh Duệ Thị (literally means “Sharp-witted Vision”) as his penname. In 1928, after having recognized Hàn’s unusual talent, his family sent him to Huế – the residence of the imperial family and the royal court since early 19th century and the heart of Vietnam even during French colonial rule – to study (Trần 15). Here, exchanges with Phan Bội Châu, one of Vietnam’s most revered nationalists, propelled Hàn and his poetry onto the national stage. He subsequently changed his pen name to Phong Trần (literally means “Life’s Wind and Dust”), hoping that a new name would make people think of him as a “more life-experienced poet instead of a scholarly one” (Hàn, “Hương thơm và mặt đất” 254-255). Hence, at a very early stage of his life, Hàn emphasized the role of personal experiences as source of inspiration and reflection that directly shaped and formed his works. Such emphasis and direction proved to be important later on when Hàn fashioned and expressed certain faith concepts in his religious poetry.

Upon his return to Qui Nhơn in 1932, Phong Trần fell in love for the first time. His heartbreaking relationships with women eventually became part of his legend until today. In 1934, he moved to Saigon for a change of scenery and career. Here, he wrote for newspapers and magazines under the new pen name Hàn Mặc Tử (meaning “the person who associates with pen and ink”). But the most important change was in his poetry. Moving away from the rigid structure of traditional Tang poetry (*Đường thơ*), Hàn pioneered the *Thơ mới* (New Poetry) movement in composing poetry in a new and free style form (C. Phan, *Thơ văn Hàn Mặc Tử phê bình và tường niệm* 13).

The year 1936 marked a sudden turn in Hàn's life and poetry. After the tragic death of his oldest brother, he moved back to Qui Nhơn to be near his mother (Nguyễn Bá Tín 29). Even more tragic, Hàn developed symptoms of Hansen's disease, otherwise known as leprosy. Consequently, he communicated these painful experiences in his *Đau Thương* (Suffering) poetry collection, in which he departed from romanticism and immersed himself more deeply in symbolism (C. Phan, "Thế giới nghệ thuật độc đáo của Hàn Mặc Tử" 317). Despite the leprosy that greatly burdened him, Hàn was active in organizing other poets in the development of modern Vietnamese literature, especially modern poetry. In addition, he wrote for *Tràng An* (Lasting Peace) newspaper to inspire young students to become more actively involved in literary work, especially poetry. Most significantly, Hàn served as leader of *Nhóm thơ Bình Định* (Bình Định Poets), which was considered a "phenomenon" in Vietnamese literature from 1936 to 1945 (C. Phan, *Thơ văn Hàn Mặc Tử phê bình và tưởng niệm* 330).

Before leprosy finally claimed his life in 1940, Hàn experienced a brief recovery. Experimenting with Eastern medicine and treatment, his fingers straightened and his skin healed. He was able to move around again and to write. Hàn and his family were relieved and excited, looking forward to his full recovery (Trần, *Hàn Mặc Tử hương thơm và mật đắng* 33-34). Hàn, who was deeply moved, attributed his miraculous recovery to the saving grace of Mary, and wrote a poem dedicated to Mary, entitled *Thánh nữ đồng trinh Maria* (Ave Maria). In addition, he composed other poems with Christian themes to convey his creative imagination of the heavenly world. Hàn assembled all these poems into his collection entitled *Xuân như ý* (Ideal Spring).

In September 1940, Hàn finally agreed to seek help from Western trained doctors. Unfortunately, it was too late. Hàn's last piece of prose was *La Pureté de l'Âme* (Purity of Soul), an expression of praise and appreciation for the Franciscan sisters, who selflessly and generously ministered to him and other leprosy patients at Quy Hòa hospital. In his final writing, Hàn called on "angels of heaven, angels of God, angels of peace and joyfulness to applaud because there are Mothers and Sisters of Saint Francis of Assisi who have descended on earth to ease the pain and sufferings of feeble mortals, of those who are sick, and of patients of leprosy such as we are" (Phạm, *Đi tìm Chân Dung Hàn Mặc Tử* 447). On November 11, 1940, at the age of 28, Hàn Mặc Tử entered his eternal rest.

HÀN MẶC TỬ: A NEW MOON FOR CATHOLICISM IN VIETNAM

Though not having been formally trained as a theologian, Hàn Mặc Tử sought for a systematic understanding of human suffering and its relationship with God rooted in his personal experience of the Christian faith through images and expressions found in Vietnamese cultures. In other words, Hàn's faith was seeking understanding from/in the concrete physical, social, and spiritual context of his experience. Consequently, Hàn's understanding of theology (divinity), anthropology (humanity) and their relationship were grounded in the faith that had been purified in the poet's "endless stream of blood and tears" (Hàn, "Tựa tập 'Xuân như ý'" 139). Accordingly, Hàn understood a "poet" as a divine being who was endowed with an intrinsic divine restlessness. Yet, the poet's restlessness served not only as a reminder of his unique identity among other beings, but also as a source of inspiration and the end goal towards which his poetry strove to reach. For Hàn, that source of inspiration and the end goal was God in the heavenly court. "Only with God," Hàn claimed, "can poets pour out all of their loathing and love; can they tell and relate their pain and suffering; and can they offer their brilliant and splendid poetic verses. Only thus will poets find peace and satisfaction" (Hàn, "Xuân như ý" 162). Therefore, poetry was but human expressions of faith, wrestled and reflected, through concrete human experience on their way to fulfillment.

My poetry soars through a lifetime without reaching its fulfillment,
 Until when does my restless soul find its rest?
 Only in the Heavenly Court that shines brightly with radiant light.
 (Hàn, "Thánh nữ Đồng trinh Maria" 292)

Even though Hàn had endured great pain and suffering, he neither condemned suffering as evil nor perceived it as punishment from a merciless God. Instead, he considered suffering to be transformative and deemed it a source of grace that led him towards intimate union with God. Hàn summarized his poetic identity in these verses.

I remember once I was a phoenix
 Soaring through nine levels of the high heaven.
 Pity for the passionate phoenix
 Having to live the fate of birds. ("Phan Thiêt! Phan Thiêt" 293)

Hàn's understanding of human suffering echoes that which had previously been expressed in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the Hebrew Bible, Psalm 42:2 reads, "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?" And again in Psalm 62:5, "Find rest, O my soul, in God alone;

my hope comes from him.” Similarly for Christians, we read in Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*, “You made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you” (21). Likewise, in Hàn’s poetry, Christian anthropology and eschatology were re-imagined and re-interpreted in traditional Vietnamese imagery and Confucian categories, e.g., the “phoenix”⁷ and “fate” respectively for Vietnamese.

Hàn used Vietnamese symbols not only to articulate his understanding of Christian anthropology and eschatology, but also to express the mystery of Divine Love. In the poem “*Đà Lạt Trăng Mờ*” (“Da Lat on a Night of Cloudy Moon”), Hàn instructed that God’s loving presence was to be found only in silence and in the harmony of nature. Once again, Hàn brilliantly re-imagined and re-articulated what the Psalmist’s wisdom in the language and context that were familiar to Vietnamese. In order to get in touch with the Divine Presence, the Psalmist taught, “Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations. I am exalted in the earth” (46:10). Let’s examine how Hàn re-interpreted the Psalmist’s thoughts in the context of Vietnamese cultures.

Be still and listen
To the water singing in the sea,
To the thin willow shivering in the wind
And to listen how the Heaven explaining love. (“Đà Lạt trăng mờ” 233)

Accordingly, Hàn understood God’s immanence in the harmony of “wind and water” as understood in Taoist geomancy (in Vietnamese *phong thủy*, Chinese *feng shui*, which literally means “wind and water.”)⁸ As a result, Hàn creatively integrated the art of *phong thủy* into creating a sacred place for experiencing the heavenly love. As faith comes first and foremost from God, it was Heaven who remained the subject who explained love. To be able to listen, to hear the Heavenly love, the person was called to position themselves in an utmost harmony of water and wind. Furthermore, the Heavenly love permeated natures and gave them life, “water singing in the sea” and “willow shivering in the wind.” In applying the art of *phong thủy* to the search for God, Hàn enriched Christianity with a new way of meditation and a new method of prayer. Also, like Saint Paul and his conviction of “love” as the greatest among all theological virtues (1 Cor. 13:13), Hàn emphasized “love” as the first heavenly movement. For Taoism, Hàn’s insight enriched Vietnamese *phong thủy* with its heavenly direction.

Besides enhancing Christian meditation and prayer with *phong thủy*, Hàn carefully selected the specific Vietnamese terms *Trời* (Heaven) for God. He chose *Trời*, which commonly appears in Vietnamese proverbs, folk songs, and daily conversation instead of *Thiên Chúa* or *Đức Chúa Trời* [Lord of Heaven] both of which were commonly used in church’s official services or worships. By assigning

the word *Trời* for the divine, Hàn chose to depict God as a dear and personal divine being. As mentioned above, “Heaven” remained the subject who has chosen to “explain” love for human beings. And only because the Heaven has taken the initiative to explain love, human persons could “hear” and experience heavenly love. Thus, as a self-communicating divine being, *Trời* embodied *both* the subject who explained love *and* the object – love – to be explained. Thus, Hàn’s poetry re-interpreted the Christian knowledge of God in *Trời* to describe *both* the immanent, personal and endearing being who remained intimately connected with human beings *and* the mysterious, transcendent divine being who continually revealed divine love to human beings in “water and wind.”

Graced by the divine loving presence, Hàn’s poetry was further inspired by other topics of the Christian faith. Hàn admitted to Bùi Tuân, one of his closest friends:

I intend to write many poems which are inspired by religious themes. In our country, no one has thought about employing the stories of Christmas and Easter as themes for their poetry. Such stories offer interesting topics that no other story could (Võ, *L’Expérience* 23).

As *Thánh thể kết tinh* (a member of the Mystical Body in union with God) (77), Hàn was convinced that he was empowered to create poetry to retell stories that have “moved the hearts of kings” (Hàn, “Thánh nữ Đồng trinh Maria” 291) and to expand the human knowledge of God’s richness and nobility.

In his *Xuân Như Ý* [Ideal Spring] Poetry Collection, Hàn did not retell the mystery of the Incarnation by simply re-enacting the narrative of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem more than 2000 years ago, which most, if not all, churches in Vietnam have done to this very day. Instead, inspired by a personal encounter with the divine presence, he creatively described the experience of “Birth” in authentic images and expressions found in Vietnamese cultures. Thus, through Hàn’s poetry, the account of Christmas – the Birth of Christ – was contemplated and expressed in the imagery and language of Vietnamese cultures. In the poem “*Ra đời*” (“Birth”), Hàn used “Spring,” a familiar Vietnamese symbol designated for *Tet* or the season that marks a new year in the Lunar Calendar, to retell the event of Jesus’ birth. This important work deserves careful and detailed examination.

To Hàn, the world was lost in pleasure and confusion before the birth of “spring.”

The Unseen⁹ has not existed in human soul.
All thoughts plunge into the insensate realm
Seductive scent deludes one in pleasure
Ah! Ah! Ah!

The earth sinks into puzzlement... (*"Ra đời"* 275)

Then, a sudden outpouring of joy and excitement during heavenly worship occurred. "Spring" was conceived.

When the whole heaven in worship,
Proclaims holy praises
The heavenly court attends in ecstasy,
Radiant light shines brilliantly.
Immeasurable, incomparable splendor
Surpass the myriad treasures of the high heaven.
My mind^o is overwhelmed because spring so splendid
Is born by the mandate of the Second Person...
Hosanna! Hosanna! Hosanna! (276)

In great joy and happiness, together with heaven, the birth of "Spring" was announced to the world.

Suddenly, all the melodies break forth throughout heaven
Unspeakably beautiful, sweet, and immense
Utterly mysterious, above all luminaries
Spring is born... (276)

Subsequently, "Spring" entered human history, becoming part of the seasonal rhythm of creation. There, "Spring" constantly served as a source of inspiration and fulfillment for one's dreams and desires. In response, the overwhelming joy of creation in witnessing such a mysterious sign of divine incarnation expressed in Vietnamese remained precious.

A sign as warm as jade, as white as ivory,¹¹
Poetic thoughts have been realized; dreams have come true. (*"Ra đời"* 276)

Glory and peace, which the divine birth has bestowed in heaven and on earth, abundantly flowed.

Peace on earth and heaven pours down its abundant grace
As radiant light sparkles in the atmosphere. (*"Nguồn thơm"* 282)

Did the content of what these verses of Hàn's poetry communicated resemble that of the angels who sang at the birth of Christ and which was recorded in the various Gospels, "Glory to God in the highest, peace to God's people on earth"?

How refreshing it must be for Vietnamese to hear the angelic songs expressed in Vietnamese language and symbols. Standing in awe of the mystery, “Heart moved with delight,” the best thing which a person could do was to “speak not for fear of lessening its meaning” (“*Ra đời*” 276).

Hàn’s poetry and its illustration of the Incarnation invoked both apophatic and cataphatic approaches in an attempt to describe God. The apophatic aspect proves to be significant pertaining not only to the relationship between Christianity and Vietnamese cultures, but also between Christianity and Vietnam’s other religions, particularly Taoism. The “fear” found in Hàn’s poems reflects an overwhelming respect and reverence for the divine mystery. Such awe-filled respect and reverence are also found in the first principle of Taoism, which states, “The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name” (*Tao Te Ching*, I). In Hàn’s mysterious “Spring,” the Second Divine Person and the Tao shared a common ground, that is, they cannot be captured fully in human words. Yet, they are part of human existence. Thus, the last two verses of *Birth* express both a lament on human shortcoming and an invitation to encounter the divine.

Oh my dear!²¹ My dear, the strange event last night:
The spring has arrived, yet no one notices. (“*Ra đời*” 276)

In his illustration of the mystical encounter with the birth of “Spring,” Hàn creatively, even daringly, applied Confucian category and invoked Taoist principles so much so that some of his critics have considered Hàn’s poetry more Taoist, more Confucian, even more Buddhist, than Christian (Võ, *L’Expérience* 391). While these criticisms are understandable, they failed to see the path and the end purpose of Hàn’s poetry. Hàn composed poetry neither to proselytize nor to advance religion for religion’s sake. Instead, Hàn’s poetry aims at understanding and serving the Lord of Heaven who reigns over all religions. In his *Quan niệm thơ* (Perspective on Poetry), Hàn adamantly insisted on adopting “the Lord of Heaven as the Truth serving the standard for composing prose and poetry” (*Chơi giữa mùa trăng* 40). Thus, Hàn’s poetry, which remained centered on God, retained its prayerfulness and humility.

In the poem “*Đêm xuân cầu nguyện*” (“Prayers on a Spring Night”), Hàn described his prayers.

I fold my hands kneeling down in joyful worship
Lifting up my face, I pray until the dawn
To offer my poetry and to unite it with the four springs
Simultaneously blossom to surpass the richness and nobility of God. (280)

Later in the poem, Hàn asked Jesus for forgiveness if his verses have offended him or fallen short in any way:

I humbly beseech you, my Lord Jesus
 To pour down your grace on the union of springs and my poetry,
 To forgive me for having offended you with those sinful verses,
 From the hand of the poet who drew on the moon:
 During many nights of struggling in the reflection of the Eternal River. (281)

Hàn's spirit begged for the grace to unite with the divine, yet he remained in the earthy realm, "in the reflection of the Eternal River," persevering through pain and suffering. As such, his poems serve as religious icons used as mediation for an experience of personal encounter with God. In fact, Hàn associated his preparation for composing his poetry to that of an iconographer approaching his icon.

Only when I experience suffering in my body and in my heart, and most especially, when I am at peace and without sin, am I able to compose those religious poems. This type of poetry cannot be written at any random moment. (Võ, *L'Expérience* 23)

Thus, Hàn's poetry is resulted from prayers experienced from the heart of Vietnamese heart and soul and so expressed in its most authentic language.

HÀN MẶC TỬ: A NEW MOON FOR THE SEASON OF THE NEW EVANGELIZATION IN VIETNAMESE CATHOLICISM

Hàn, whose writings incorporate both a daring creativity in his use of the Vietnamese language and a profound expression of his faith in God, transformed his pain and suffering into a source of inspiration for both Vietnamese Catholicism and Vietnam's modern literature. Through his poetry, the Christian faith and Vietnamese culture encountered each other at a deeper, more intimate level that enabled each to enrich the other. On one hand, the newly claimed self-awareness in Vietnamese cultures enabled Catholics like Hàn to articulate their faith in their authentic cultural expression. On the other hand, the post-persecution Catholic church opened Vietnamese cultures to a new world perspective at the beginning of the twentieth century. Hence, Catholicism remains neither as a "guest" nor a "stranger" to Vietnamese cultures and religions.

As demonstrated above, Hàn's works did more than merely translate Christian concepts into Vietnamese or artfully syncretize Catholicism with Vietnam's

other religious traditions. As a Vietnamese, Hàn creatively applied Vietnamese cultural images and expressions into capturing and articulating the faith that was grounded in his life experience within a particular context of Vietnamese history. Through Hàn's personal faith expression, Catholicism has been enriched with new vocabularies that had their roots in Vietnamese cultures. Faithfully, Hàn preserved and maintained both the integrity of Christianity and the reverence for Vietnamese cultures and Vietnam's other religious traditions. Thus, Hàn's life and works proved that it was possible to remain faithful to the Christian faith while maintaining his patriotism to the motherland.

As a Catholic, Hàn's writings offered a new understanding and vision of human suffering to Vietnamese cultures through the Christian perspective. Most notably, his insights on suffering, a major element in Christian teaching, challenged the Vietnamese view on the subject. In general, Vietnamese considered suffering to be a punishment for sins committed by either the individual or the individual's ancestors. In contrast, Hàn acknowledged suffering as a source of grace that pulled him towards intimate union with the Lord of Heaven. In fact, some of Hàn's friends, who considered themselves "guests of Christianity," observed that, "for Hàn, poetry possesses an extraordinary relationship with God. Poetry is used not only to praise God but also to unite people with God. With Hàn, God is very near" (Hoài Thanh 208).

Furthermore, Hàn's redemptive view of suffering offered Vietnamese cultures an alternative perspective on human suffering and its meaning. Concretely, through Hàn's poetry, Vietnamese could come to understand Christian teachings on human suffering as sources of love and compassion that inspire people to serve those who are marginalized as a means to participating in God's salvific acts. Neither competing nor winning over other religious traditions, the divine value of love and compassion taught in Christianity added to the rich and harmonious religious system of values that had already existed in Vietnam, namely, the belief in heaven and filial piety praised in Vietnam's *Đạo Trời Trời* (The Way of Heaven), the understanding of *nghiệp quả* (consequence) in Buddhism, the acknowledgement of *số mệnh* (fate) in Confucianism, and the appreciation of *vô vi* (non-contrivance) in Taoism.

With Hàn Mặc Tử, according to the literary critic Vũ Ngọc Phan, "religious poetry was born in Vietnam" (128). Truly, Hàn and his writings opened up paths for other Vietnamese poets and artists to explore religious themes in general and Christian themes in particular. More importantly, Hàn's writings introduced to Vietnamese cultures to a God who is transcendent and immanent yet dear and personal to all people, and who has a special love for those who are oppressed, abandoned and marginalized. Thus, through Hàn's poetry, Catholicism was no longer considered

as “agent of imperialism” that had enslaved Vietnam, but as agent of changes that empower and transform Vietnamese people in their way towards true freedom and liberation.

Writings of Hàn Mặc Tử have drawn numerous critics, admirers, and everyone in between. There have been critics who questioned Hàn’s emotional outburst compared him to “those insane poets who could cry at one time, and laugh at another” (Hoài Thanh 203). There have been admirers who named Hàn as “a true genius of this poor country... and when all of the critics and standards of measure disappeared, what would define this era, what would be worth talking about remain Hàn Mặc Tử” (Chế, “Những kỷ niệm về Hàn Mặc Tử” 82). And there have been those who decided that it would be “heartless” to either praise or criticize the person who “was thrown outside of society, kept in isolation away from friends and family.” Therefore, it is better to observe silence when facing the one whom “we had mindlessly forgotten” (Hoài Thanh 211). No matter what position one chooses, no one can deny Hàn Mặc Tử’s place in Vietnam’s modern literature.

In 1943, evaluating Hàn and his writings were placed among Vietnam’s premier modern writers (Vũ 128). In 1989, the Department of Education selected Hàn’s poem, “*Đây thôn Vĩ Dạ*” (Here is Vĩ Dạ Village), to be taught in all Vietnamese high schools as an example of Vietnam’s modern poetry from 1930 to 1945 (Phạm, “Phan Thiết và sáu xuân nữ Hàn Mặc Tử yêu” 82). To my knowledge, Hàn is arguably the only Catholic writer whose writings resume an important part of the officially recognized body of Vietnamese modern poetry under the communist government today. Hence, through Hàn’s life and works, the Vietnamese Catholic Church was no longer an “outsider” or a “threat to national security,” but an active participant and contributor to the heritage of Vietnam’s modern literature.

For the Catholic Church in Vietnam, whose 7 million members make up 7.5% of the total Vietnam’s population, the path towards mutual understanding between the Church and Vietnam’s current communist government is still “long” (McDermott). For the Church, much of the ground works still need to be done at all levels as the three-year plan for the New Evangelization has indicated, most especially, regarding how to integrate the Christian faith into the Vietnamese cultures in such a way more Vietnamese people can understand the message of the Gospel. As demonstrated in this paper, Hàn Mặc Tử’s poetry and its inspiration can serve as a new moon providing light for such an integration during the season of the New Evangelization in Vietnamese Catholicism today.

Notes

1. Christoforo Borri, one of the earliest Jesuit missionaries in Vietnam, recalled a play performed in a market place where a boy was being asked whether he would like to become Christian was interpreted literally as “little boy, will you go into the belly of the Portuguese or not” (Dror 139).
2. Condemned in 1663 (cf. *Khâm Định Việt Sử Thông Giám Cương Mục Chính Biên* [Vietnamese Imperial Historical Records], vol. 33, plate 6b).
3. I am grateful to Prof. Anh Tran for this reference.
4. Under the rule of the Trịnh clan in the North and the Nguyễn and the Tây Sơn regimes in the South (1545 – 1787) about 30,000 Catholics were killed. Approximately 40,000 more were killed under the rule of the three emperors of the Nguyễn dynasty: Minh Mạng (1820-1840), Thiệu Trị (1841-1847), and Tự Đức (1848 -1883). Finally during the Văn Thân movement (1864-1885), 60,000 more were killed.
5. However, Phạm Xuân Tuyền later recovered Hàn’s baptismal certificate which shows that his baptismal name was Francois.
6. The “seven words and eight verses” rule means a poem can only consist of eight lines each of which comprises of seven [monosyllabic] words each. (All Vietnamese words are monosyllabic).
7. The Vietnamese consider four mythical animals to be sacred: the dragon, the Qilin (a dragon-unicorn hybrid), the tortoise, and the phoenix. The phoenix is regarded as the lord of all birds. It is believed that a saint is born where the phoenix appears (Trịnh Văn Thanh 1106).
8. Under the influence of Taoism, Vietnamese believe that all beings are intimately united in one intricate and harmonious network of nature; humans must enter this relationship to achieve peace and happiness. Therefore, physical location bears significant meanings in Vietnamese culture. For example, Vietnamese who want to build or purchase a home seek the advice of a geomancer on a suitable location that will help them attain peace in their home.
9. According to Trần Thanh Mại, Buddhism divided the cosmos into two realms: the material and the immaterial world, the seen and the unseen. Here Hàn compares the immaterial world with the stillness of one’s soul. See Phan Cự Đệ, *Thơ văn Hàn Mặc Tử* [Poetry and Prose of Han Mac Tu] 275.

10. A play on words: In Vietnamese, “Trí” literally means the mind. However, “Trí” is also the real name of Hàn Mặc Tử.
11. This is a reference to a Vietnamese expression: “Trong như ngọc, trắng như ngà” (clear as jade, white as ivory) which is often used to refer to something magical or extraordinary. Also, people believe that wearing jade can bring warmth and health to the body.
12. According to a footnote of the poem, “my dear” refers to the poet.

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