

RENDER UNTO CAESAR: THE INTERACTION BETWEEN RELIGION AND ECONOMY IN THE ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES OF CATHOLICS IN THE MEKONG DELTA

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ABSTRACT

If we look at human nature from the perspective of classical economics, religion and economics do not seem to be directly connected. While religion represents the pursuit of noble values namely truth, beauty, happiness, holiness, and selflessness, doing business is unanimous with the worship of material wealth. However, a closer examination would reveal the interrelations between these two realms. A strong religious belief can actually have significant influence on the way the believers engage in their businesses toward the path of righteousness, and a thriving business could, in turn, enhance the followers' commitment to the religion. Although the connection between religious belief and economic activities has been discussed in the literature, limited scholarly attention is paid on the phenomenon among the Catholics in Vietnam, a community that has not been examined considerably on areas other than their religious practices or political involvement in the past. Based on an ethnographic study of the Catholics' economic activities in the Mekong Delta, especially in Cái Mon Parish in Bến Tre province and the Main Parish in Cần Thơ city, this article argues that religious beliefs could influence and govern the economic behaviour of Catholic followers through the values of honouring God, justice, and charity. These values have inspired the principle of "getting rich righteously" among the Catholics in the Mekong Delta and motivated them to fulfil their civic obligations in society at large. Findings from this study helps shed light on the

religious beliefs—economic activities engagement and contribute to the literature on Catholics' economic activities in Vietnam, an area which remains understudied.

Keywords: Catholicism, justice, charity, honouring God, Mekong Delta

INTRODUCTION

Max Weber recognised that although scientific, political, legal, and economic factors influenced the development of Western capitalism, religious beliefs also had a role. He believed that Western rationalism, or “rationalismus”, was rooted in the rational morality of Calvinist asceticism. He described the spirit of capitalism as “the attitude which seeks profit rationally and systematically” (Weber 2005: 27–28). For Calvinists, the “earning of money...[was] the result and the expression of virtue and proficiency in a calling” (Weber 2005: 19). Therefore, labour is to glorify God. Accumulating wealth by practising a calling seems to be not only morally permissible but enjoined.

In the same line with Weber, McCleary and Barro (2019) highlighted how religious values such as diligence, honesty, and thriftiness might motivate more efficient work. In some religions, the blessings of salvation can be obtained in this life to ensure a better next life. According to these authors, compensation in the afterlife, be it salvation, punishment, or nirvana, might serve as the main driving force of human behaviour. Salvation is closely related to human activities. In the case of Buddhism, it attaches great importance to salvation and provides Buddhists with many opportunities for spiritual diligence, such as being honest in economic activities and financially supporting the temple, making offerings, and supporting family and friends (McCleary and Barro 2019).

In the Southeast Asian context, Keyes (1983) analysed the influence of rationalism and religion on the economic behaviour of farmers in north-eastern Thailand. He observed that Theravada Buddhist ethics motivated people to work more efficiently. Keyes maintained that in this case, the nature of farmers' economic behaviour is a combination of economic rationality and social necessity. Thai farmers' economic rationality is reflected in their cultivation of new rice varieties, clearing of land, diversification of agricultural products, and formation of private companies. The characteristic morality of Theravada Buddhism is “the law of kamma”. In his view, *kamma* is the ultimate ordering principle of sentient existence. It refers to the force set in motion by actions with moral considerations. Morally relevant actions performed in previous lives are said to determine the place that a sentient

being occupies on the hierarchy of freedom from suffering. As a result, Thai farmers consciously perform acts of merit by contributing wealth to the temple and avoiding getting rich, abandoning their passions and desires. In business they tend to question whether their economic behaviour will cause anyone to suffer. Keyes emphasised that this Buddhist consciousness has long been prominent in the economic activities of the Thai people because they are “Buddhists who are also peasants” (Keyes 1983: 856–866). As such, Weber (2005), McCleary and Barro (2019), and Keyes (1983) showed how religious beliefs could influence and govern economic behaviours in different ways in various parts of the world.

However, similar aspects have not been closely examined in the context of Vietnam among Catholic believers. Existing literature on Catholicism in Vietnam focuses mostly on historical features (Hồng 1944; Nguyễn 1997; Phan 1965), organisation (Đoàn 1973; Trần 2012; Võ 1974; Vũ 1972), politics (Cao 1968; Phạm 1972; Vũ 1974), faith (Nguyễn 1991), and nationalism (Cao 1991). On the other hand, studies of Catholics’ economic activities or the interaction between religious beliefs and economic activities in Catholicism tend to examine aspects of economic development and sustainable development (Nguyễn and Nguyễn 2018; Phạm 2015; Trương 2015). Therefore, the interaction between religious beliefs and economic engagements, especially those of Catholicism in Vietnam, remains unexplored and deserves more scholarly attention.

Against such context, this research offers an account focusing on the economic activities of Catholics in the Mekong Delta, particularly in Bến Tre province and Cần Thơ city. The findings suggest that religious values influence individual economic behaviour, which, in turn, impacts the economy at large. Specifically, it is the values of honour, justice, and charity that seem to dominate the mind and conducts of these believers in their daily economic life. To show how religious beliefs influence Catholics’ economic activities, this article begins by outlining the studied communities and their religious beliefs before analysing how religious beliefs influence the ways they make a living through various types of work. In that sense, the concept of economic activities used in this study could be seen as “labour” or “work to make a profit or get rich”.

THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT OF THE MEKONG DELTA

The Mekong Delta, which comprises 12 provinces and one municipality¹ and is reputed as a major rice production hub, encompasses a vast geographical area in the Lower Mekong region in Southern Vietnam (Mạc 1991: 11).

The region borders the sea to the north, south and southeast, and with a relatively flat landscape featured by extensive networks of waterways which facilitate water-bound transports. The delta covers a total area of 4,081,639 ha in which agricultural land accounts for 3,406,777 ha, non-agricultural land makes up 639,080 ha, unoccupied land is 35,783 ha, and coastal water surface land comprises 32,221 ha (Ministry of National Resources and Environment 2021). Thanks to its geographical position lying at the end of the Mekong and its tributaries before discharging to the sea, the Mekong Delta receives a high volume of sediment annually. Thus, the region has long been unanimously identified with the wealth of natural resources and aquatic and marine life. Pedological features of the delta are characterised with four types of soils including illuvial soil, saline soil, acid sulphate and saline acid sulphate soils, and sandy soil (Lê 1982: 266–268). Local residents conduct economic activities in accordance with the types of soil available in their areas.

To take full advantage of such a major river delta of Southeast Asia, Vietnam has promulgated a range of policies to promote the development of the region, most importantly the Resolution 21-NQ-TW dated 20 January 2003 of the Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam on the directions, missions, and measures for socio-economic development and national defence and security in the Mekong Delta in the 2001–2010 period and Conclusion 28-KL/TW dated 14 August 2012 of the Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam on the directions, missions, and measures for socio-economic development and national defence and security in the Mekong Delta in 2011–2020. The Government of Vietnam has also promulgated a wide range of policies for regional development which aim at promoting economic growth contributing to national development including Decision No. 939/QĐ-TTg dated 19 July 2012 approving the general plan for socio-economic development of the Mekong Delta to 2020, Decision No. 492/QĐ-TTg dated 16 April 2009 approving the project for establishing the Mekong Delta Key Economic Zone, Decision No. 26/2008/QĐ-TTg promulgating the mechanisms and policies for supporting socio-economic developments in Mekong Delta provinces and municipality to 2010, and most recently Resolution 120/NQ-CP dated

17 November 2017 of the government on sustainable development in the Mekong Delta.

Thanks to prioritised resource allocation and local efforts, socio-economic conditions and the infrastructure of the region have witnessed significant improvements. In recent decades, the delta ranks first nationwide in rice and fruits production and exports. According to the Ministry of Planning and Investment, the Mekong Delta contributes 50% of rice output, 65% of aquatic products, 70% of fruits, 95% of rice export, and 60% of fish export to the country (Vũ et al. 2021: 116).

The region's infrastructure has also been significantly improved in recent years. In terms of road transport, since 2002 the vertical road axis connecting the delta with Ho Chi Minh City and south-eastern provinces and the horizontal road axis for regional linkage have essentially completed. By 2020, the region's national road mileage had reached 2,688 km, a 52% increase compared to 2002 including the upgraded National Road 1 from Ho Chi Minh City to Cần Thơ ending in Cà Mau. New highways have also been introduced including those connecting Ho Chi Minh City and Cần Thơ and connecting Ho Chi Minh City with coastal provinces to Cà Mau. New seaports have also been constructed including Long An International Port. Industrial zones and industrial clusters have also been established in many parts of the region.³

In summary, nearly five decades after the reunification of Vietnam and over 35 years since the Đổi Mới policy (renovation policy), the Mekong Delta region has significantly transformed to become a dynamic agricultural production area. Besides, commercial activities and the service sector have also developed to contribute to regional developments.

Within the contemporary socio-economic context, the Catholics like other religious communities in the Mekong Delta have also experienced the dynamics of the region in their economic activities while practising their own religious beliefs. According to the 2019 Vietnam Population and Housing Census, the Catholic population in Vietnam is approximately 5,866,169.⁴ In the Mekong Delta, which encompasses four Catholic dioceses of Mỹ Tho, Vĩnh Long, Cần Thơ, and Long Xuyên, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam's source reports a total of 771,735 Catholic followers as of 2017.⁵ That means the region is home to 13.5% of Vietnamese Catholics, who make up a marginal 3.7% of the total population of Mekong Delta. However, this study shows that the Catholic community in the Mekong Delta and their economic activities reach out to a much wider public than their own fellow believers. For them, doing good things to others is the most appropriate way to glorify God.

OVERVIEW OF THE TWO STUDY SITES

Cái Mơn Parish in Bến Tre

The Parish of Cái Mơn is located in the Diocese of Vĩnh Long in the Mekong Delta. Cái Mơn refers to a Catholic community with a long history in southern Vietnam. According to the 2019 yearbook of the Cái Mơn Catholic Council, in 1700 (the year of the dragon), many Catholics fled the Nguyễn lords' strict policy prohibiting Catholic practices. They sought asylum in Phú Yên province in the south-central region before resettling in Đồng Nai and Gia Định (now Ho Chi Minh City) along the banks of the Vàm Cỏ Tây River. Some later migrated to Cái Mơn to acquire a livelihood by raising silkworms and drying fish. These families are considered the ancestors of the Cái Mơn Catholics.

Prior to 1975,⁶ the parish allocated farmland to parishioners, and the parish collected taxes from these residents to sustain parish activities (Cái Mơn Parish 2019).⁷ Generations of Catholics in Cái Mơn Parish have raised fruit trees, ornamental trees, and flowers, engaged in trade, and worked as freelance labourers. Among these, cultivating fruits and flowers have been the local people's main livelihood.

In addition to the main parish church of Cái Mơn and its adjacent area, there are other Catholic villages, including Quảng Ngãi, Vĩnh Bình, Bà Dung, Vĩnh Chính, and Địa Cừ, which are also under the jurisdiction of the Cái Mơn Parish. In each of these villages, there is a sub-parish church to accommodate local villagers' religious practices. In 2019, 25,000 Catholics were listed in the baptismal records of the parish, but that does not take deaths in the parish into account. Furthermore, approximately 5,000 Catholics have left the region to work elsewhere but remain on church rolls.

Cần Thơ Main Parish in Cần Thơ City

Cần Thơ Main Parish is located in the Diocese of Cần Thơ, an area with a complex history. According to the records of the Diocese of Cần Thơ, on 20 September 1955, Pope Pius XII's apostolic decree "Quod Christus" declared the separation of Vietnamese provinces of Phong Dinh, Ba Xuyên, Bạc Liêu, An Xuyên, Chương Thiện, An Giang, Kiên Giang, Hà Tiên, Châu Đốc, and Sa Đéc from the Apostolic Vicariate of Phnom Penh to establish the Apostolic Vicariate of Cần Thơ. Fr Nguyễn Văn Bình was appointed as the first bishop of the Apostolic Vicariate of Cần Thơ. At that time, the Apostolic

Vicariate of Cần Thơ covered an area of 23,583 km², with a total population of 2,183,597, including 83,610 local Catholics. After that, about 65,000 northern Vietnamese Catholic immigrants came to live in the area over time. In 1960, the Apostolic Vicariate of Cần Thơ was made Diocese of Cần Thơ before being split to form three other Dioceses of Long Xuyên, Vĩnh Long, and Mỹ Tho.

Cần Thơ Main Cathedral is now located in Cần Thơ City, adjacent to 23 other parishes. It is the oldest parish in the region, with a history of more than 100 years. Before 1975, most of the parish land was allocated to the parishioners for farming or accommodation purposes. Parishioners had to pay tribute to the parish, mainly in the form of rice they had raised (Cần Thơ Main Parish 2015). As of the end of 2019, there were 3,129 followers in the Cần Thơ Main Parish. According to research and investigations conducted by the Cần Thơ Municipal Commission of Religious Affairs in 2019, as urban residents, parishioners mainly work in small businesses or as labourers.

METHODOLOGY

To reflect the diverse range of Catholics' economic activities, we chose one community in a rural area (Bến Tre) and the other in an urban centre (Cần Thơ) as the sites of the study. In-depth interviews and participant observations were conducted in these two Catholic communities, namely, Cái Môn Parish in Bến Tre province and Cần Thơ Main Parish in Cần Thơ city. Cái Môn is regionally and nationally famous for planting ornamental and fruit trees, which has been developed into a local craft since its introduction to the area in the nineteenth century along with Catholic missionary activities. Meanwhile, Cần Thơ is the busiest urban centre in the Mekong Delta, which is characterised by commercial activities and services. Therefore, this study chose the Cần Thơ Main Parish's community to explore how religious values underlined the Catholics' economic activities in an urban setting, which would provide a meaningful comparison with those of their rural counterparts.

The participant recruitment process involved support from both local officials and parish priests. Before contacting the believers and parish priests for the interviews and participating in the observation of their economic and religious activities, the researcher reached out to local officials and those with good understanding about the localities for strategic interviews to collect general information regarding these two research sites. Subsequently, the priests of the two parishes were contacted through the introduction of local

authorities. The exchanges with the priests involved the historical processes of their respective parishes, the sociocultural characteristics of local Catholic communities, as well as moral perspectives of livelihood activities in the Catholic doctrine. Due to the Catholics' residential particularities, the researcher reached out for believers in the two communities in various ways. In Cái Mơn Parish, most Catholics reside in the areas adjacent to Cái Mơn main church and other sub-parish churches, hence, the researcher went to the site and talked to them in person. In the case of Cần Thơ Main Parish, since the church is in a densely populated commercial area where the Catholics live scattered among non-believers, the priests were of great help in introducing the research participants. By the end of the process, 45 people including priests as well as Catholic lay people such as business owners, salespersons, farmers, and local leaders were interviewed. Due to the COVID-19 epidemic, intermittent investigations were conducted between December 2019 and December 2020.

CATHOLIC DOCTRINES RELATED TO ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

As mentioned above, the economic behaviour referred to in this article is the production of and making profit. Specifically, the Catholics in Bến Tre province mainly grow and sell ornamental plants, while believers in Cần Thơ City mainly make a living from trade and services. To understand the role of religious belief in Catholics' economic life, a discussion on economic activities in Catholicism would be helpful.

Economic Concepts Drawn from the Bible

The Bible and the social doctrines of the Catholic Church serve as the basic principles guiding the lives and activities of Catholics. Regarding labour and making profit or wealth, both the Bible and social doctrines refer to labour as the mission given by God, and the creation of wealth or profit must be mainly for worshipping God.

In Genesis, after God created the universe, He created man and placed him in the Garden of Eden so that he might “rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals”⁸ (Gen 1: 26). God wants people to manage the universe for Him and make the universe a more beautiful place. Hence, people should work hard and fulfil

their responsibilities, that is, do God's will. Therefore, from the point of view of Christianity, human labour is seen as a response to God's call to humanity (interview with parish priests in Cần Thơ and Bến Tre, 3 and 10 December 2020).

On the other hand, Catholic teaching does not encourage the accumulation of material wealth for personal interest. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus warned of the dangers of wealth. Although wealth can bring enjoyment and one must thank God for his material blessings, wealth is still a constant danger. According to the Apostle Paul, money is degenerate as “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1 Tim. 6: 10).⁸ Jesus said that it is difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of God: “Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Matt. 19: 24).⁸ Also, God teaches people to have a serious attitude in doing things: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters” (Col. 3: 23).⁸ Therefore, according to the Bible, material wealth is not the goal of life but rather a mean to worship God.

Social Teachings of the Catholic Church

In addition to the doctrine expressed in the Bible, the Catholic followers are also influenced by the social doctrine expressed in teachings of the Second Vatican Council.

The Second Vatican Council (11 October 1962 – 8 December 1965) established that in Catholic doctrine, work contributes to the creation and realisation of God's will in history. It further proclaimed that economic activities with profit as the ultimate goal were morally unacceptable. In addition, unchecked desire for money could lead to dire consequences and disrupt social order. However, when private property and capital are used to contribute to the common good, the accumulation of wealth may be considered a lofty moral goal.

Catholic doctrines about work and getting rich through economic activities are passed on to followers through specific channels. Only those authorised by the church such as the clergy have the right to interpret the word of God. A dignitary explained as follows:

To Catholics, when people work, they are fulfilling the duties God has given them. Labour is the way people cooperate with God to perfect the universe and create salvation for themselves...The remaining

problem is that we have to think about how to implement the principle “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, to God what belongs to God”. This is the motto for Christians to do business. In our daily lives, we always think of living according to this motto. (interview with the Catholic Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Ho Chi Minh City City, 20 December 2020)

Generally, in the Catholics’ mind, “working” and “getting rich” are both regarded as missions given by God to continue the work of creating and spreading life and transforming nature. Living in a particular society, the Catholics have a duty to translate these texts and teachings into daily practices in their respective communities.

WORKING AND GETTING RICH AS A CATHOLIC

In the two communities studied, the Catholics engage in various economic activities. The Catholics in rural Cái Mơn Parish are mainly farmers who grow ornamental plants and fruit trees, while their counterparts in urban Cần Thơ Main Parish exclusively engage in business or the service sector. In both communities, the believers express the concept of work as glorifying and serving God. Whether it is to make a living or get rich, they believe that they must fulfil both God’s will and their civic responsibilities by obeying the word of God and upholding the values of justice and charity and getting rich righteously.

Labour is to Honour God, Guided by the Values of Justice and Charity

According to the study’s results, the Catholics in the Mekong Delta are often interested in how to increase the value of their work and honour God through their careers. The believers regard work as a “mission”⁹ to create wealth to support their families, contribute to the common interests of the church and society, and ensure that the wealth created does not adversely affect others. When they are engaged in their own professions, they show faith in their own beliefs and act in accordance with religious-oriented moral values.

Because they live on the land with unique ecology and history,¹⁰ the Catholics in Cái Mơn Parish mainly engage in ornamental and fruit tree growing. They work in occupations related to ornamental plant businesses such as potting, weeding, pruning, and transporting the plants, which occur throughout the year. In the eyes of the Catholics, Cái Mơn’s profession of

making ornamental plants is a long-standing craft which encourages the believers to work hard and be creative at the same time. For example, from Christmas to Lunar New Year,¹¹ the parishioners are usually occupied with selling ornamental plants and helping the business of the parish as during this period, the parish needs significant manpower to decorate the church and organise religious activities. Therefore, local Catholics need to arrange their family affairs so that they can send people to handle the assigned tasks voluntarily. Hence, it is clear that the values of Cái Mơn's Catholic believers' labour are embodied in the spirit of hard work, diligence, career development, devotion to religious affairs, and social service. A Catholic believer shared:

Regarding business, we have a responsibility to maintain our religious beliefs, so [we] do not do anything wrong. Catholics here do honest things with a conscience. For example, when we make bonsai here, we have to make beautiful, high-quality bonsai, instead of making fake trees and selling them to customers. To do business, you must be honest, and then God will give you the wisdom and strength to create beautiful products. The same is true for making flowerpots. We must make high-quality pots. We cannot make bad quality pots because the Catholic conscience does not allow it. In production, business, or trade, we must compete fairly, and we must not use tricks to benefit ourselves and harm others. Because if we cheat, God knows, and others know. In the end, we will suffer economic loss and loss of reputation in business. (interview with N. V. T., 55 years old, a male bonsai seller, Cái Mơn, 5 December 2020)

The believers in Cần Thơ also claim that their occupation is “arranged by God”.¹² Therefore, when they work, they respectfully worship God, who laid a solid foundation for their work and life. They rely on their religious beliefs, pray for God's blessings,¹³ and get spiritual support and peace of mind serving the glory of God in their careers. The believers hold that whether it is manual labour or intellectual work, regardless of occupation, everyone must work in a “righteous” way.

To glorify God, the believers in the two communities are not only diligent but also proud of their achievements in the activities of building and maintaining the church activities to praise their religion. They think that this is a “natural” obligation, so church work is always at the heart of their devotion in terms of time and energy.

In addition to treating one's work or career as means to glorify God, create material wealth for society, support self and family, and serve the

religion and society, the Catholics also bear in mind the concepts of justice and charity as they pursue their livelihood. In the Catholic view, justice and charity are closely interrelated. Justice means caring for others, which is manifested in relationships of mutual respect and equality, including respect for God. According to them, God always shows justice. God pays attention to the weak so that they can approach God's love like other people. The Apostle Paul urges Christians to "do everything for love" (1 Cor. 16: 14).⁸ Those who want to practise God's word in their lives must treat others in the way God treats them. In a 15 December 2020 interview, local Catholic leaders in Cần Thơ told that those who receive God's grace in their work, such as prosperity, must give love universally, "according to human virtue". Therefore, to promote "justice", people must show "charity" to everyone.

A Catholic businessman demonstrated the relationship between these two values as follows:

I run a restaurant business. I treat my employees as close friends, so they respect and love me. If we hire employees, we must pay wages in accordance with the contract or agreement between both parties. However, when I see my employees work hard, if my income becomes better, I will increase their salary, or sometimes I will reward them. The employees working here are comfortable and always do their best. (interview with H. T. A., 43 years old, Cần Thơ, 15 December 2020)

Honour, justice, and charity are not only reflected in the believers' daily work, but in their active participation in charitable activities organised by local and parish groups. They offer rice and money to economically disadvantaged families, lepers, the terminally ill, and orphans, provide scholarships for students of deprived background, raise orphans and abandoned babies, and support mental health care in their own localities and neighbouring provinces. To share his reasons for participating in volunteer activities, one believer said:

The purpose of charity is to take Jesus' commands to the heart so that hungry people can eat, thirsty people can drink water, and poor people can wear warm [clothes]. They are the poor and disadvantaged groups in our parish, the sick and disabled in our charity shelters. Their lives are so unfortunate and unfair, so much pain and despair. (interview with N. V. H., 52 years old, businessman, Cái Mon, 3 December 2020)

Similarly, a Catholic businesswoman reported:

My charity stems from my religious belief that the rich must share with the needy, and treat the needy with a generous eye. The charity work of the church was first initiated by the parish priest and then supported by myself and everyone. Without faith, generosity, and leaders, we cannot do it. My charity team distributes rice to the poor at the church twice a week, 300 packages each time. (interview with T. T. H., 32 years old, Cần Thơ, 16 December 2020)

These statements suggest that the Catholics believe that they are obligated by God to support themselves, their families, their religion, and the society by their labour. The believers emphasise and conform to moral values, such as justice and sharing, in their work, honouring God's word. Living in modern society, the believers draw a clear distinction between their responsibilities as citizens and their Catholic faith.

The Catholics' charitable activities are mostly conducted in their respected churches, yet the scope does not necessarily restrict to the believers' communities. Take the charitable activities of Cần Thơ's Main parish's community as an example. The activities include:

1. Weekly activities: in 2018, the parish started the Meals of Compassion programme every Sunday which offers 300 breakfast servings for those in need regardless of their religious orientations. In 2020, the programme started to offer breakfast on Thursday on the same principle. Each serving is worth VND20,000 (USD0.86).
2. Monthly activities: the parish organises The Rice Bunch of Compassion which offer 120 offerings of rice (10 kg each) for disadvantaged households. To be eligible for the scheme the households need to be qualified and certified as impoverished households by the parish; 60% of the families under this scheme are non-Catholic. Since 2021 the parish has opened the Zero VND Supermarket to serve these households. Each will be given VND100,000 (USD4.35) per month for purchasing goods from the parish's supermarket.
3. Annual activities: the parish holds giveaway events in major celebrations including Christmas, Lunar New Year, and Easter. In 2020, the parish gave an extra of 150 offerings (10 kg of rice and VND100,000 [USD4.35] cash each) for other near-impoverished families outside of the regular scheme in the aforementioned celebrations. In August, when school starts, the parish also offers financial support for 130–150 local students with the amounts ranging from VND1,000,000 (USD43.50) for high schoolers, VND800,000

(USD35) for secondary students, and VND500,000 (USD22) for primary pupils.

During the recent wave of COVID-19 pandemic, from July to October 2021 when Cần Thơ city implemented Government's Decision 16 on social distancing, the parish distributed 15 tonnes of rice, 400 boxes of instant noodles, 1,200 servings of vegetables, and VND120,000,000 (USD5,217) in cash to quarantined families. Besides, the parish also had 37 volunteers including two priests and 35 monastics serve in Cần Thơ City General Hospital (field diary 2020 and 2022 in Cần Thơ).

The Parish of Cái Mơn also has similar charitable activities as part of the Catholics' practice of the Word of God including mobile healthcare services and giveaway events in major celebrations such as Christmas, Lunar New Year, and Easter for both parishioners and non-believers alike in the area. At Quảng Ngãi sub-parish church of the Parish of Cái Mơn, local Catholics hold annual "meat sharing" before Lunar New Year providing impoverished families in the area with pork, which is an essential item in Vietnamese tradition in the New Year. In Lunar New Year of 2019, against the surge in pork price of that particular year, the priest in charge of Quảng Ngãi sub-parish church supported each of the economically disadvantaged family in the area VND300,000 (USD12.83) to purchase this essential item for New Year celebration. During COVID-19 peak times, Cái Mơn Parish also held similar activities to that of the Main Parish of Cần Thơ by giving away rice and necessary items to those in need.

"Getting Rich" as the Responsibility of a Citizen and the Duty of a Catholic

"Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's" is Jesus' answer when asked whether the Jews should pay taxes to Rome, as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew (Matt. 22: 15–22).⁸ Biblical commentators once put forward this statement of Jesus that the relationship between Christianity and the secular government is an independent relationship between theocracy and secular power. This line implies that in addition to the obligation to abide by the laws of the earthly authority, believers also have the responsibility to build God's kingdom based on God's word.

This teaching of God is very clearly expressed in the opinions of believers, especially those who do business.¹⁴ The believers in the service and trade industries are obliged to pay taxes and abide by the state's regulations

on their professions. To make more profit, ordinary traders often find ways to pay less tax and not to comply with national regulations and standards. However, the Catholics who participated in this study conceived “getting rich” as upholding their responsibility as citizens and pursuing the ultimate goal of showing the Catholic faith. In the language of the participants in this study, the interaction of these two responsibilities is characteristic of the “righteous” Catholic. From the perspective of the believers, “righteous wealth” means breaking neither the law nor religious teachings. A businesswoman offered:

At present, in such a vast market, no matter what type of business, people are doing all kinds of bad things and ignoring the health of consumers. As a Catholic, I have always known that even if I am a small business owner, I still have to put honesty first and do all my work wholeheartedly. I see that the business of local Catholics is built on trust and integrity in order to retain customers for a long time. (interview with T. T. H., 31 years old, Cần Thơ, 20 December 2020)

Another Catholic businesswoman observed:

In this era, counterfeit and shoddy goods are flooding the market, and consumers have difficulty distinguishing the quality [of the things they buy]. If the seller is dishonest, the customer will be greatly harmed. Many of them also evade personal income tax in some way. I see local Catholics do business with integrity. (interview with P. T. X., 42 years old, Cần Thơ, 20 December 2020)

This study reveals the close relationship between Catholics’ religious and economic activities; in fact, one serves as a prerequisite for the other. It also demonstrates how religious values influence these believers’ actions in the secular world. Religious moral values guide the behaviour of believers, enabling them to voluntarily comply with national laws and regulations to protect humans and the environment. Catholic leaders want to guide their followers to build a better world. From the clergy to ordinary believers, everyone believes that everything in the world is a gift from God, so people must accept it as a gift. When Catholics do business and improve their mastery, they must choose behaviour that conforms to both secular and religious understandings and responsibilities. Catholicism does not hinder the believers’ accumulation of wealth, but demands they act responsibly and conscientiously. Therefore, for Catholic leaders, “any profession whose purpose is to protect human life, cultivate human life, and build a world full of justice and love is to glorify God” (interview with Catholic dignitaries, 19 May 2020).

The Catholic businessmen and businesswomen in the interviews demonstrate strong beliefs and convictions, which help them to gain wisdom, insight, and confidence in the high-risk occupations¹⁵ that they are pursuing. They claim that God is the one who illuminates and guides them so that they have “the wisdom” to make the right decisions. If they have bad luck in work or life, the believers explain it within the framework of their own beliefs. They themselves must “accept” it instead of “resenting” the supreme God. To solve their problems, the believers turn to God through prayer to “be protected and comforted”. In the words of the believers, the “eye of faith” illuminates all their economic behaviour.

CONCLUSION

The article demonstrates the powerful influence of religious values on the Catholics’ economic behaviour in the Mekong Delta, namely “working” and “getting rich”. “Work” is not just doing a job to make a living; rather, the Catholics use work to express their supreme responsibility. Work enables people to accumulate material wealth, feed the needy, and contribute to the development of social and religious organisations. By working, people can also “get rich” when they get more profit. Though getting rich is not encouraged in Catholic texts, the Catholics in the studied areas highlighted the value of “justice” and “charity” in their economic activities. More importantly, they honour God and make themselves deserving followers of God’s words. “Honouring God” is the ultimate value that the Catholics pursue in their economic activities.

Living in modern society, the Catholics in the Mekong Delta maintain their beliefs and values while observing the state’s various rules and regulations. This study shows that the believers harmonise theological and secular values, aiming to build a just and beautiful society. Therefore, the Catholic moral framework motivates the believers in the Mekong Delta to fulfil their civic obligations in secular society, including their economic behaviour while upholding their faith. Thus, “getting rich righteously” has become a significant goal for Catholics in the communities we studied.

This article also calls for future studies which might elaborate the religious economic activities nexus among other groups of religious believers in the Mekong Delta, and in Vietnam in general. Such studies would shed light on the lesser-investigated topic of how religion might govern the economic

behaviour of certain parts of the population in various geographical locations in Asia and the world.

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study.

NOTES

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¹ The 12 provinces include An Giang, Bến Tre, Bạc Liêu, Cà Mau, Đồng Tháp, Hậu Giang, Kiên Giang, Sóc Trăng, Long An, Tiền Giang, Trà Vinh, and Vĩnh Long; and the only municipality in the region is Cần Thơ.

- ² Total agricultural land area in the Mekong Delta is 3,406,777 ha (which includes 2,615,632 ha of arable land, 253,843 ha of forest land, 529,654 ha of aquatic production land, 5,449 ha of production land, and 2,199 ha of other types of agricultural land) (Ministry of National Resources and Environment 2021).
- ³ According to information from the National Conference on Thorough Understanding and Implementation of Resolution No. 13-NQ/TW of the 13th Politburo on the directions, missions, and measures for socio-economic development and national defence and security in the Mekong Delta to 2030, vision 2045 (Nguyễn 2022).
- ⁴ Completed Results of the 2019 Vietnam Population and Housing Census (<https://www.gso.gov.vn/du-lieu-va-so-lieu-thong-ke/2020/11/ket-qua-toan-bo-tong-dieu-tra-dan-so-va-nha-o-nam-2019/>; accessed 30 June 2022).
- ⁵ Website of Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam (<https://hdgmvietnam.com/>; accessed 30 June 2022).
- ⁶ The year 1975 marked a regime change in the south of Vietnam. Therefore, it is also used to mark the socio-economic changes that were consequences of this political change.
- ⁷ In the years of formation of both Cái Mơn Parish and Cần Thơ Main Parish, colonial authorities granted large areas of land to the churches as the parish priests were French nationals. The lands then were delegated to the believers for cultivation or as parts of their means of livelihood. The believers then had to pay the ground rent in kind to the parish. Regarding the plots of parish properties that the believers temporarily resided in before 1975, the parish eventually transferred the land use right to those tenants.
- ⁸ All Biblical quotations are taken from the Old and New Testament Bibles—God's Word for Everyone (2006; Hanoi: Tôn giáo). Translations are by the researcher.
- ⁹ Interview with a male believer who grows ornamental plants in Cái Mơn, 3 December 2020.
- ¹⁰ Gardening and growing fruit are said to be related to the history of Catholic missions in the area. The Gernot priest and some missionaries brought cocoa, coffee, sapote, mangosteen, and other seedlings from some Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand to Cái Mơn.
- ¹¹ Vietnamese Catholics celebrate both Christmas and Lunar New Year. Lunar New Year is a traditional festival which ends the old year and starts the new one, while Christmas is one of the most important religious events for the Catholics in a liturgical year. On these events, people often decorate their houses and the church with beautiful plants and flowers. Cái Mơn is famous for growing decorative plants. Therefore, Cái Mơn people in the flower and plant trade are very busy during holiday seasons.
- ¹² Interview with a 51-year-old female believer in Cần Thơ, 19 December 2020.
- ¹³ When God's blessing is needed, believers often donate VND200,000 to VND500,000 (USD9 to USD22) in the church during holidays, especially Sunday Mass, to obtain the blessing of the Father. During normal holidays, they donate VND20,000 (USD0.87) to VND100,000 (USD4.35) at will.
- ¹⁴ The Vietnamese government exempts the agricultural sector from taxation. Hence, Cái Mơn farmers' obligations to the state are less obvious.
- ¹⁵ High risk occupations are those that requires large financial investment but due to the fluctuation of the market, there is a high percentage of not getting the planned target. Instead, businessmen and businesswomen can get into serious financial difficulty.

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