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**THE CAO DAI:
A NEW RELIGIOUS
MOVEMENT**



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CAODAIST DOCTRINE

The Caodaists explored questions which no sagacity could have solved, thus the immediate sources of Cao Đài ideology may not be sufficient to explain why Caodaism is so popular. Thus Caodaist doctrine should properly be perceived in terms of Eliade's "hierophanies", taking that term in its widest sense as any thing that manifests the sacred.

The words "Cao Đài" mean "High Palace", referring to the supreme palace where the Supreme Being dwells. Caodaists worship the Supreme Being, the Creator of the Universe and of all religions, the Father of Mankind - therefore the peoples of the world are viewed as brothers and sisters, members of a one universal family. The characters of Cao Đài could be found in the Chinese edition of the British and Foreign Biblical Society (Shanghai, 1913, PSA 94:22 But the Lord is my defence; and my God is the rock of my refuge; Ch.94, 22: O Jehovah, Tu es bien le Palais Suprême où nous prenons refuge). But large scale religious conversion - as it was the case with Caodaism - is most likely linked to the broader question of ideological change. In the popular mind, rebellion was linked to the restoration of monarchy. The term "Cao Đài" may have carried an association of "temple in the mountain" - restoration of monarchy - or "temple which guards the mountain" - defends the fatherland. But more abstractly, the millenarian vision of the end of the world and the coming of the Third Era could have been equated with the return of the golden age of the ideal eternal kingdom (Werner, 1980, p.13). Ideologically, Caodaism drew from the politic-religious symbolism and imagery of popular rebellion: but it developed as an attempt to face the ideological challenge of the West.

One of the Caodaist sacred texts "Đại Thừa Chơn Giáo" formally prohibits any attempt to clarify the meaning of these words. The text forbids to discuss the meaning of the words Cao Đài, which is believed to be clarified only on the occasion of Long Hoa Assembly (Cấm các con bàn về hai chữ Cao Đài... Chờ đến Long Hoa Đại Hội sẽ rõ - Đại Thừa Chơn Giáo, 1956, p 205), Caodaist Day of Judgement which had only been ascertained to signify the forthcoming end of the existing phenomenal world and the beginning of the new millennium.

Caodaists believe that their doctrine provides the synthesis of five (Ngũ Chi - Phật Đạo, Tiên Đạo, Nhơn Đạo, Thần Đạo, Thánh Đạo) great teachings of the past: Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, cult of ancestors, Western religions. According to Caodaism, the teaching shows the way for overcoming intolerance of earlier salvations.

The full name of Cao Đài religion - "The Great Way of the Third Era of Salvation" signifies universalistic and ecumenical essence of the doctrine. The "First Era of Salvation" (Nhứt Kỳ Phổ Độ: Nhiên Đăng Cổ Phật - Buddha Dipankara - Phật Đạo; Thái Thượng Đạo Quân - Tiên Đạo; Phục Hi - Nhân Đạo; Moses -Thánh Đạo), according to Caodaist doctrine, chronologically associates with Moses,

Buddha Dipankara, and Chinese deities Fu Hsi and T'ai Shan Dao Guan. The "Second Era of Salvation" (Nhị Kỳ Phổ Độ: Shakyamuni - Phật Đạo; Lão Tử - Tiên Đạo; Confucius - Nhân Đạo; Jesus Christ; Mohammad- Thánh Đạo; Shintoisme japonais- Thần Đạo) is believed to be represented by Buddha Shakyamuni, Confucius, Lao Tzu, Jesus Christ and Mohammed. Caodaists claim that the salvations of the past did not reach necessary degree of perfection and subsequently failed, because the divine message was delivered through prophets, thus being subject to distortion by mutually anathematizing adepts. Caodaists believe that the divine message is communicated to the humanity by various means and by different prophets, and slowly but surely, the true doctrine became polluted by human ignorance.

The Third Era of Salvation (Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ: Spirits - Đại Đạo. By the message of June 5, 1926 the adepts were instructed to consult Phật Tông Nguyên Lý book for the meaning of the characters Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ, but they could not find this text in local old pagodas - Cf. Thánh Ngôn, 1964, p.21; L'Histoire du Caodaïsme, 1950, p.1) is supposed to be the highest of religious revelation as the humans are granted an opportunity to communicate with the transcendental world via mediums. The Caodaists deny the possibility of the fourth salvation.

Caodaism was a whole new syncretic religion, it was built up and gathered dogmas as it gathered adherents. However, the Caodaist teleology of World Eras has been perceived as Buddhist and its Golden Age shows symbolic connections with the coming Buddha Maytreya (Sarkisyanz, 1984, pp.177-178). Another parallels may be mentioned, for instance the concept of Joachim of Fiore (1145-1202) of Age of Law, Age of Gospel, Age of Spirit. To some observers Cao Đài or "High Place" was somewhat associated with French revolutionary Etre Supreme (Duncanson, 1968, p.126-127).

According to Phạm Công Tắc, Phật Đạo embraces Buddhism, Hinduism and Pythagorean teaching, Thiên Đạo - Taoism and thaumaturgical practices, Thánh Đạo - Catholicism, Protestantism and Islam, Thần Đạo - Chinese, Egyptian and Greek beliefs, Nhơn Đạo - the teachings of Confucius, Mentius, Socrat and Plato. He also declared that Caodaism was predicted by the Western spiritism and the Theosophic society (Thánh Ngôn, 1972, p.312). The universalism of Caodaism with its considerable reconciliatory potential is believed to correspond to the level of intergration processes in the modern world in larger measure than any other existing religion. The aim of the new religion was believed to be revitalisation of the humanity in the universal peace. Caodaists argue that the essence of earlier religious revelations has been misinterpreted by superstitions and ignorance, while their new religion aims to reestablish its true meaning, bringing the quintessence of all the religions back to their original essence.

Caodaists believe that Human spirit is immortal, while the Supreme Being (Thượng Đế) is the universal Preceptor and Father of all living creatures. The Caodaists believe that physical death is not an end, but only a continuation of life - the physical body may be dead, but the soul lives to be reincarnated or to be reunited with the Supreme Being. The sufferings originate from human's spirit con-

tamination by the material phenomena, the sufferings originate from the human, not from the Supreme Being.

Furthermore, a question that all religions and philosophies have grappled with over the millennia - Why is there suffering and injustice in the world? - is answered in Buddhist terms of Karmic retribution in Caodaism. The new religion is supposed to guide towards deliverance and ultimately towards deliverance and ultimately towards salvation. The adepts are promised that if man follows Caodaists doctrine, they will escape from the cycle of reincarnation and find his way back and be reunited with Cao Đài. Caodaist doctrine is supposed to be capable of allowing to immediately break away from the wheel of Karma, of opening the doors to immortality, of putting an end to suffering.

The Caodaists, according to Hồ Tấn Khoa, believe in the Supreme Being, unique and universal, omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. The Supreme Being/God who rules in this space is the Creator of all the Universe. The originality of Caodaism is in its announcement that Hell has been closed due to the Third Salvation, the Celestial Way is open to all Souls (Bernardini, 1974, p.39). The Caodaists also believe in the essential unity of macrocosm and microcosm - that Heaven and Hell are also in the Heart (Địa Ngục, Thiên Đàng cũng chỉ tại tâm - Đại Thừa Chơn Giáo, 1956, p.191). Caodaists say that Nirvara does not mean extinction, but the formless, immortal life of the spirits (Cõi sống bất diệt hay Nát bàn của đạo Cao Đài là cõi sống vô hình của những linh hồn đặc đạo... Đồng Tân, 1974, p.16). The source of the ultimate revelation in Caodaism is the direct communication with spirits via mediums.

Human being, according to Caodaist anthropology, is identical to the unity of Vitality-Mind-Spirit (tinh - khí - thần) and Caodaist cosmology explains the genesis of the universe by the interaction of Yin-Yang (Âm - Dương) principles. Caodaist spiritualism also are largely based on Taoist Yin-Yang symbolism. In Caodaism the process of interaction of Vitality-Mind-Spirit is interpreted as the mystic purification of human nature (luyện tinh hóa khí, luyện khí hóa thần).

Caodaists believe that the worship Celestial Eye - a symbol of the Universal Unity and the Unique Truth - is the worship God (Thiên Nhân; L'Oeil du Dieu - Thờ Thiên Nhân là thờ Thầy; Nguyễn Trung Hậu, 1927, p.20). The object of veneration was left eye, symbolizing Positive-Yang-Dương Principle. The Caodaist temples are to be built so that the Celestial Eye would be directed to the North. For reasons neither religion, the occult nor science can satisfactorily explain, the Eye is believed to be the Gate of the Human Heart, the Heart is Creation or Spirit, the Spirit is Idea of Emptiness, the Idea of Emptiness is Heaven (Nhân là cửa trái tim của con người. Trái tim ấy là Tạo Hóa, tức là thần, mà thần là cái lý hư vô. Lý hư vô ấy là Trời vậy - Đại Thừa Chơn Giáo, 1956, p.70). The profound understanding of Celestial Eye symbolism was believed to be esoteric.

During the early stage of development of the movement, the Caodaists argued that Celestial Eye was ecumenical religious symbol, present in all Catholic churches ("existant dans toutes les Eglises catholiques" - Nguyễn Trung Hậu, 1927, p.20). But some observers remained skeptical, claiming

that the Caodaists intentionally chosen Celestial Eye - resembling the Masonic symbol - so as to win sympathy of those French government officials who were members of masonry (Dufeit, 1956, p.15). However, the Caodaists argue that the veneration of Celestial Eye should not be treated as syncretic borrowing, pointing out that Caodaist Celestial Eye has nothing to do with the Masonic Eye (Author's interview with Võ Văn Phép, the head of Tây Ninh church, March 1988).

Despite the paucity of details, Caodaism has documented as a syncretism of the Vietnamese Three-Religion system (Tam Giáo), which stressed almagamation and merger of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Although organisationally Caodaism marked a departure from past Vietnamese practice, its ideology drew heavily from the Three-Religion tradition and beliefs widespread in Vietnamese society at large (Werner, 1980, p.8).

The Three Religions were believed to be three branches, growing from a common stem, which has existed from pre-historic times; this stem is the religion of the Universe, its parts and phenomena. Putting it in De Groot's words, this teaching seemed to be a doctrine of Universism, actually being "the one religion" (De Groot, 1912, pp.2-3).

Moreover, three colors of Caodaist religious banner - golden, blue, and red - are viewed as a symbol of the unity of the Three Religions (Tam Giáo qui nguyên - the banner is called Bảo Sanh Kỳ. cf. Phạm Công Tắc, 1970, p.25). The symbolism of the Caodaist banner - Confucianism associated with red, Buddhism with yellow, and Taoism with blue - was revealed in early years of the movement (Cf. Nguyễn Trung Hậu, 1927, p.11). Red color of the Caodaist banner was seen as a symbol of authority, yellow - of morality, blue - tolerance. The symbolism was also reflected in colors of ritual robes of the dignitaries within the three outlets of the executive branches in Tây Ninh. However, it is understood that there were no associations between the three colors and the Three periods of salvations (Đồng Tân, 1974, p.70).

Moreover, three branches of Caodaist church in fact do not have much to do with any of religions named as such (Oliver, 1976, p.62). However, researchers have argued that doctrinally and in religious practice, Caodaism can be characterized as mainly Taoist in nature (Werner, 1980, p.6). This claim may be substantiated by some Caodaist scriptures. For instance, the adepts of esoteric Caodaism believe that the Way existed before the Universe, and it was ruled by Lao Tzu (Trước khi chưa có Trời Đất đã có Đạo, Lão Tử làm chủ đạo - Ibid, 1956, p.95). According to an adept of Đà Nẵng sect, Caodaism has many marks of the deep influence of Taoism (Trần Quốc Luyện, Lão Tử và Đạo Giáo, Cao Đài Giáo Lý magazine. Cơ quan phổ thông giáo lý Cao Đài giáo. Saigon. March - April, 1974, p.17). Chiếu Minh sect of Caodaism promised the adepts to help them finding a drug guaranteeing eternal life (Danh hiệu Cao Đài, phái Chiếu Minh; Luyện hườn đơn sẽ đắc Trường Sinh - Đại Thừa Chơn Giáo, 1956, p. 102). According to this text, Taoism - another fragment of ancestral wisdom - may be understood in its entirety only by the men of the superior intellect, not by the ordinary people (người bậc thượng trí; thượng nhơn - Ibid, 1956, p.102).

Not surprisingly, during the early years of Caodaist proselytizing efforts the Caodaists had to deny their perceived links with Taoist sects. Some contemporary observers believed that the Cao Đài in fact was Taoism (Đạo Tiên), because it was based upon mediumistic practices allegedly borrowed from Taoist cults (Nguyễn Trung Hậu, 1927, p.5). This practice of magic possibly reflected a logical affinity perhaps between the practice of magic, with a view to getting round the laws of nature, and association in secret societies and unorthodox movements, with a view to getting round the laws of king (Duncanson, 1968, p.49). Thus the Caodaist spiritist practices have been viewed with a measure of mistrust by many governments, from the French colonial administration to the current Communist regime.

It is widely believed that Caodaist religion is fundamentally, and deliberately, syncretic (R.B. Smith, 1970, p.574). Caodaism, both a social movement and a religion, has been perceived as is syncretistic in its organisational structures, philosophy, theology and ritual practices (Oliver, 1976, p.1). Moreover, syncretism, which may be tentatively defined as the borrowing, affirmation or intergration of concepts, symbols or practices of one religious tradition into another by a process of selection and reconciliation (Berling, 1980, p.10), has been central to the religious life of the Vietnamese. Syncretic borrowing may not be entirely conscious, but it is understood that syncretism is not a hypocritical manipulation.

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However, Caodaism was not quite a Syn-cre-tism - the citizens of Creta overcame internal disputes and banded together to face common enemy. It was the traditional grassroots syncretism in Vietnam which has been enriched by the coming of Caodaism - the new doctrine contains so many elements of the pre-existing amalgam that it simply became part of it (Hickey, 1964, p.56). Furthermore, it has been argued that religious synthesis would be valid only when it intergrated disparate elements from different traditions while fully retaining their original definitions, overtones, connotations, and associations (Berling, 1980, p.5). By that standard, any form of syncretism, is likely to appear as an impoverishment of genuine tradition. However, syncretism, as opposed to ecletism, assumes a firm basis of religious authority. It is not simply a random juxtaposition of elements into idiosyncratic whole, but the incorporation of various elements into a home tradition (Berling, 1980, p.10). Syncretism requires that borrowed elements be reconciled to accommodate them to the worldview and doctrines of home tradition - in a process called “transposition” by Van der Leeuw. One might also use a linguistic metaphor and call it “translation”. Symcretism tends to be highly selective, and the patterns of selectivity reflect the particular religious needs and interests of the syncretist denomination and the historical and cultural nexus against which they emerged.

But there is a difference between syncretic slogans and statements which exhibit syncretic attitudes: the latter show how various religious elements are reconciled instead of merely proclaiming their essential unity (Ibid, p.6). This pattern of thinking produced another slogan: “The Great Way gives birth to the Way of Three Religions, the Way of Three Religions re-unites in the Great Way” (Đại

Đạo phát sinh Tam Giáo Đạo, Tam Giáo Đạo quy nguyên Đại Đạo).

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Apart from Three Religions syncretism, many adepts believe that Caodaism includes the esoteric teaching of Non - Exertion (Nội Giáo Vô Vi) - and the Religion (Tôn giáo) popular teaching of prozelitism. Thus Caodaism comprises two “true teachings” - esoteric and popular (Đại Thừa Chơn Giáo, 1956, p.110). This concept of dual character of the religion could be traced in writings of the French spiritualists, who argued that all great religions had both overt and hidden sides (Toutes les grandes religions ont eu 2 faces, l’une apparente, l’autre cachée - Denis, Après la Mort, p.11). But only the adepts of Chiếu Minh esoteric school of Caodaism believe that their doctrine is yet to reach the stage of “universal openness” (Đại Thừa Chơn Giáo, 1956, p. II).

But though Caodaism views the peoples of the world as brothers and sisters, the mankind, according to Caodaists, can also be divided into Confucian categories of noblemen (quân tử), which follow the principles of humanity, righteousness and non-exertion and smaller ones (tiểu nhân), those who prefer fame and personal interests. The adepts of Caodaism are also divided into 2 categories: those of “the Higher Vehicle” (Thượng thừa) and “the Lower Vehicle” (hạ thừa), depending on their level of spiritual enlightenment. In some Caodaist schools the category of “Middle Vehicle” was added (trung thừa).

CAODAIST CANON

The Sacred Sayings (Thánh Ngôn), Caodaist canonical scripture, is the key revelation of the new religion, being a collection of spirits' messages. The Caodaists believe these revelations have proved more important to the human race than any communications yet received. The earlier messages became the cornerstone of Caodaist doctrine and cult. It was a message of February 25, 1926 which institutionalized rituals of the new religion, including the veneration of the Celestial Eye. The text of November 20, 1926 introduced Caodaist hierarchy - this message of key importance was detailed in the canonical books - The New Law (Tân Luật) and Religious Code (Pháp Chánh Truyền; while Tân Luật recognized by all Caodaists, the book of Pháp Chánh Truyền, Phạm Công Tắc's commentaries on the New Law, is used only by Tây Ninh church).

The first message of Thánh Ngôn, received on Christmas 1925 was opened by mentioning celestial "sovereignty" (Ta nắm chủ quyền - Thánh Ngôn, 1964, p.5) and the names of twelve earliest disciplines. Some messages are more specific. On February 28, 1927 the spirit of Li Bo gave instructions how to build the main temple in Tây Ninh, including its dimensions in metric system, not the traditional Vietnamese measures.

Traditional Vietnamese set of millenarian ideas is present in early Caodaist texts: the message of November 11, 1926 said the new religion is supposed to save all living creatures from sufferings of the Low Era (trong lúc Hạ Nguơn này mà vớt sanh linh ra khỏi vòng khổ hải - Thánh Ngôn, 1964, p.127). Some messages comprise prophecies of disasters and conflicts, including World War II as well. Nevertheless, millenarian motives do not enjoy the dominant position in early Caodaist scriptures: its most important element may be summed up as a concept of institutionalization of the movement.

Apocalyptic vision and millenarian expectations were obviously present in Caodaism during the late 1920s. The preface of the Sacred Sayings was opened by a warning about the imminent end of Low Era (Cuối Hạ Nguơn này - Thánh Ngôn). According to Caodaism, the "Low Era" was the period of the destruction of most of all living creatures (Kỳ Hạ Nguơn hầu mẫn, nhơn vật vì tai nạn mà phải tiêu tan mười phần còn lại có một mà thôi - Ibid, p.80), upcoming annihilation was perceived to be near (nạn tiêu diệt hầu gần). The mission of the new revelation, Caodaist doctrine, was thought to be universal and the adepts were encouraged to provide a model for the mankind (Ibid, p.32).

The millenarianism seems to be omnipresent in the Caodaist canonical texts. One of the important concepts of Caodaism - "Opening the Way" (Khai Đạo) is apocalypse-associated term. The millenarian ideology is reflected in the triadic time-scheme of the "Three Eras", while the myth of the millenium looked like a leap of the imagination between the intolerable present and the perfect future (Hue Tam

Ho Tai, 1983, p.99). So the apocalyptic expectations are directly connected with the salvationist aspects of the doctrine.

However, it was only “True Teaching of Mahayana” - the collection of messages of Chiếu Minh sect - comprises the elaborated triple-period millenarian time-scheme. The text describes the world cycle as the consequence of “Higher, Middle and Low” Eras (Thượng, Trung, Hạ Nguơn). The first is associated with the creation, the second - with the struggle, and the third - with destruction (tạo, tranh đấu, tiêu diệt - Đại Thừa Chơn Giáo, 1956, p.40). The whole triadic cycle is believed to last 129,600 years. “Đại Thừa Chơn Giáo” emphasizes the triple-period time scheme: the first period is believed to be the Era of creation when the universe emerged created (Dụng Càn Khôn Vũ Trụ). It is also associated with the period of “High antiquity” (Thượng Cổ). The second Era is also called the period of Supreme force or the era of Struggle (đời Thượng lực; nguơn Tranh đấu) because force is believed to be widely used during this period. The third Era is believed to be marked by the intensified fighting among men which lead to the global catastrophe, so it is also called the era of destruction or the Era of the Last Reincarnation. But this apocalypse period is followed by the Era of revitalized morality (Nguơn Đạo đức phục hưng), which corresponds to the spirit of High antiquity, so this period is also called the Era of Re-creation or Conservation Era (Nguơn Tái tạo; Nguơn Bảo Tồn - Đại Thừa Chơn Giáo, 1956, p.40). Only the true faith would guarantee final salvation, and the adepts have to propagate the Great Way during this period of the Last Reincarnation (Các con phải... bành trướng Đại Đạo... trong thời mạt kiếp này - Ibid, p.141, 173). According to Caodaism, the present Third Salvation is believed to be the last one, and there would be no Fourth Salvation.

It is significant to note here that in most occult circles the notion of freedom is a part of a system involving the ideas of cosmic renovation, religious universalism (Eliade, 1976, p.65). In line with its millenarian doctrine, Caodaism advocates the re-establishment of Era of universal fraternity, that would mean peace and happiness (Phạm Công Tắc, 1970, p.18) while the highest aim of Caodaism is the salvation of the mankind in its entirety. However, Mahayanist bodhisattvayana salvationism has nothing in common with Caodaism, which concept of salvation is totally sui generis (Hoàn toàn độc lập - Đồng Tân, 1974, p.45).

In the meantime, every adept of Caodaism is supposed to practice religion so as to be prepared to the day of final judgment - Long Hoa Assembly. It is also considered as the Day of final Amnesty (Đại Hội Long Hoa - Hội Ân-xá; Phạm Công Tắc, 1970, p.67). According to Tây Ninh church, the Long Hoa Assembly can be visible (hữu hình) and invisible (vô hình). The first means the public recognition of adept and/or dignitary's merits by giving the rank within religious hierarchy. The second means final judgment in the transcendental world. The Caodaists view this worldly universe as a place for merit-making, thus the death can just lead to a better world (Author's interview with Võ Văn Phép, the head of Tây Ninh church, March 1988).

Many Caodaists believe the materialization of an ancient prophecy “By the Last period of Time the Heaven opens the Mysterious Teaching” coincides with the time when Caodaism emerged (Mạt hậu

Thiên khai Huỳnh Đạo - Đại Thừa Chơn Giáo, 1956, p.57).

Not surprisingly, spiritist overtones - including the Western terms - are present in Caodaist scripture. The message of January 3, 1926 emphasized the importance of the True spirit (Chơn Thần) or Périspirit (nhị xác thần) which was believed to be mysterious and immortal. The True Spirit of Caodaist God was believed to be the Father of all deities and the mankind, and the essential unity of microcosm and macrocosm was declared (các con là Thầy, Thầy là các con - July 22, 1926, Ibid, p.30). Putting it in other words, “God is you and you are God” (Nguyễn Long Thành, 1970: Oliver, 1972, p.23).

The same idea - also present in Ch’an Buddhism - was emphasized on October 24, 1926 (Thầy là chư Phật, chư Phật là Thầy. Các con là chư Phật, chư Phật là các con - Thánh Ngôn, 1964, p.48). This message also stressed the high antiquity of Buddhist teaching, which was believed to be revealed in the immediate aftermath after the universal creation (Thầy lập Phật giáo vừa khi khai Thiên, lập Địa - Ibid, p.48). Buddhism was believed to be followed by Taoism, and Confucianism was believed to be the latest of the three revelations (Phật giáo là trước, kế Tiên giáo, rồi mới tới Nho giáo - Ibid, p.48). Perceived degradation of the existing religions has been proclaimed in Caodaist doctrine. For instance, in accordance with earlier unorthodox Buddhist tradition, Ch’an patriarch Shen Hsiu was blamed for abandoning “true teaching” of Buddhism (mất Chánh giáo - Ibid, p.21).

Another message warned the adepts: “Possessing the three True Religions, now you are blessed with yet another True Religion” (Các con có cả ba chánh đạo là Tam Giáo... ngày nay lại thêm chánh đạo nữa, các con biết ít nước nào đang vậy? - Thánh Ngôn, 1964, p.47). The faithful were also told that the period of Three Religions was nearing the end (còn chẳng bao lâu nữa, thì Tam Giáo Đạo đã ngưng lại hết - Ibid, p.54) “and thou shalt not ignore it”.

The first Caodaist message in French also emphasized a perceived misinterpretation of Christianity, saying the New Testament was preached without proper understanding of the Holy Scripture (“Le Christ est venu parmi vous... Quel profit avez-vous pendant presque deux mille ans de son absence? Vous prêchez son Evangélie sans même le comprendre... Cette doctrine, au lieu d’apporter à l’humanité la paix et la concorde, lui apporte la dissension et la guerre. Voilà pourquoi je viens vous apporter moi-même la paix tant promise - June 8, 1926 - Ibid, p.23). Another message on November 28, 1926 pointed out that the advent of Cao Đài was supposed to combat heresies so as to propagate the new doctrine to the world (“viens comme le Christ était venu parmi vous pour combattre l’hérésie et évangéliser le monde” Ibid, p.63).

The next message in French was delivered on October 1, 1926. The text warned that the Era of destruction is coming (l’ Ere de destruction approche” - Ibid, p.46), emphasizing the need of a new Doctrine capable to keep humanity in peace. The uniqueness of “Vietnamese experience” due to its adherence to the cult of ancestors was also emphasized (“Seule la nation annamite conserve religieusement le culte millénaire des morts; quoique cette nation ne connaisse depuis sa création que la servitude, elle reste telle que je le désire...”- Ibid, p.46).

On October 27-28, 1926 two more messages were delivered in French. Millenarian motives were evident in the first text: "Humanity was suffering from all kinds of vicissitudes. I sent Allen Kardec. I sent Flammarion, as I also sent Elijah and John the Baptist, precursors of the advent of Jesus Christ. One was persecuted, the other killed. Who did it? Humanity. Even My Son was killed by you; you worship Him in spirit but not in holiness. I wanted to talk to you just once during Moses day on Mount Sinai, but you could not understand Me. The promise I made to your ancestors for your redemption, the advent of Christ, was prophesied but you did not care to listen. Now I must make use of spiritual means so as to convince you..." (October 27, 1926 - *La vertu de Dieu est détruite; la haine universelle s'envenime; la guerre mondiale est inévitable... L'humanité souffre de toutes sortes de vicissitudes. J'ai envoyé Allan Kardec; j'ai envoyé Flammarion comme j'ai envoyé Elie et Saint-Jean-Baptiste, précurseurs de l'avènement de Jésus Christ. Je voulais causer avec vous en une seule fois au temps de Moïse sur le Mont Sinai, vous ne pouviez me comprendre... Il faut que je me serve moi-même maintenant d'un moyen plus spirituel pour vous convaincre... cette doctrine sera universelle* - Thánh Ngôn, 1964, p.50). The messages in French were concluded by the call for Franco-Vietnamese harmony, destined to live in a community of life and interests ("La race française et la race annamite sont mes deux bénites. Je voudrais que vous soyez unis pour toujours. La nouvelle doctrine que j'enseigne a pour but de vous mettre dans une communauté d'intérêt et de vie - Ibid, pp.50-51. According to another message, "des deux races française et annamite appelées à vivre ensemble par ma volonté dans une communauté de vie et d'intérêts - Ibid, p.67). The use of French language in spiritistic communication was explained on December 19, 1926: "Many of you know French, so I use it for better understanding" (Các con phần nhiều biết tiếng Langsa, Thầy dùng nói cho các con dễ hiểu Đạo lý" - Ibid, p.70). But despite these overtures, some messages however were viewed with suspicion by the French colonial authorities, notably the text of September 1, 1926 insisted that Caodaism had to become the state religion of Vietnam (Quốc Đạo), and by October of the same year Caodaist expansion abroad was predicted.

The messages in French heralded the sublime appearance by listing the prophets predicting the advent of the future revelation, Caodaism. The message of November 12, 1926 said that Confucianism was predicted by Chou Gun, Buddhism - by Dipankara and Brama, Christianity - by Moses, Eliah, Jeremiah, and St. John the Baptist (Ibid, p.57). Furthermore, spiritism was described as a religion of the future ("Une religion d'avenir" - Ibid, p.67).

The necessity of merit-making religious activity also was emphasized in early messages (Muốn cho đắc Đạo, phải có công quả - The message of July 5, 1926; Thánh Ngôn, 1964, p.26). Caodaist morality also was proclaimed to be an "armor" protecting from against evil spirits (Bộ thiết giáp - Ibid, p.34). Elitarian motives also are present in Caodaist teaching: "Without knowledge of the Doctrine it is impossible to be human" (Không biết Đạo không phải là người - Ibid, p.74).

However, Caodaist canonical scriptures seem to be build along around the institutionalizing nexus. On October 29, 1926 the message entrusted administration functions (Quyền thưởng phạt - Ibid, p.52) to the spirit of medieval Chinese poet Li Bo. On November 20, 1926 full description of Caodaist

hierarchy was delivered by a message, the Highest dignitary (Giáo Tông) was described as “elder brother” (Anh cả - Ibid, p.57) of the adepts, which has bodily, not spiritual powers. The post of three cardinals (Chưởng Pháp) were established in line with the Three Religions: these dignitaries were assigned personal seals by which the future laws should not be promulgated (Ibid.,58).

The message of April 1926 stressed the unity of the new church, while setting up schismatic groups was strictly prohibited - the punishment was excommunication (Không đăng gây phe, lập đảng... kẻ nào phạm tội thì Thầy trục xuất ra ngoài - Thánh Ngôn, 1964, p.18). Schismatic activity was proclaimed to be a “great crime” (Chia phe, phân phái là điều đại tội trước mặt Thầy - Ibid, p.43). The message of August 27, 1926 pointed out that religious ranks should not be granted indiscriminately to every adept (Đừng tưởng làm Tước Phẩm Thiên Đạo Thầy đem cho ai cũng đăng - Ibid, p.40).

On July 17, 1926 the order was issued by a message to set up a “female community” within the church (Phải tuân lệnh Thầy mà lập thành Nữ phái - Ibid, p.28), Lê Sơn Thánh Mẫu was announced to be the deity of “female community” (Ibid, p.55). The purity of the body was believed to be necessary condition of purity of the soul, so the faithful were ordered to observe permanent fasting (Phải có một thân phàm tinh khiết mới xuất Chơn Thần tinh khiết - Ibid, p.29-30).

On September 18, 1926 the new Teaching was proclaimed “the sole True Path” and “National Religion” of Vietnam (Từ đây trong nước Nam duy có một Đạo chơn thật là Đạo Thầy... gọi là Quốc Đạo - Ibid, p.43). The unity of the Vietnamese people also was believed to be heavenly promulgated (Từ đây nòi giống chẳng chia ba, Thầy hiệp các con lại một nhà - Ibid, p.49). As early as on September 22, 1926 the adepts were urged “to fight” for their faith (Thầy dạy các con một điều là biết tranh đấu cùng Thầy - Ibid, p.44).

It is understood that the melange of beliefs and institution-building patterns which characterized Caodaism seemed to be a cultural by-product of a tradition of protest (Werner, 1980, p.11). Because the ideologies of millenarian movements contain both testable and untestable elements (Barkun, 1974, p.121), its multifunctionalism was manipulatable by those who had little to gain from a rigorous ideological system.

It is believed that before 1946, Caodaism represented a kind of cultural nationalism for some members of upper class who desired to break away from the cultural domination of the French (Werner, 1980, p. 57). Adepts prided themselves on their sophistication and their receptivity to modern ideas, but they were also anxious to find within their own culture some spiritual equivalence with the West (Huệ Tâm Hồ Tài, 1983, p.86). The establishing of the True Teaching for the Vietnamese people was believed to be important achievement (Tạo lập nền chánh giáo cho dân Nam Việt chẳng phải là việc nhỏ đâu - Thánh Ngôn, 1964, p.66). It was a sort of Asian “Occidentalism”, one of its deepest images of the Other. This also contributed to mass adherence to the movement, as well as the nationalistic overtones.

It is widely accepted that ancestor worship is the most elementary form of patriotism. Moreover, the legends about ancestors, including Hùng dynasty, became part of Vietnamese political memory, a valid collective consciousness (Huỳnh Kim Khánh, 1982, p.29).

...

In seances on December 20, 24, 1926 Cao Đài instructed the first disciples to prepare the new laws for the religion. He ratified their efforts in a seance message prepare the new laws for the religion. He ratified their efforts in a seance message on January 16, 1927, accepting Tân Luật in its entirety (Oliver, 1976, p.50). According to the Tân Luật - New Code, conversions of ordinary people to Caodaism require the approval of two Caodaists and a baptismal ceremony performed at a Cao Đài parish. An adept (tín đồ) is required to observe vegetarian diet. The Laws on the Secular Life of the Faithful (Thế Luật) gives instructions on the rules of social behavior, highlighting modesty. The New Law forbids the traditional custom of polygamy and counsel against lavish funeral arrangements.

The main canonical texts of Caodaism (Thánh Ngôn, Tân Luật, and Pháp Chánh Truyền - Trần Duy Nghĩa, 1973, p.5) are officially considered to be judicial literature of the church. Pháp Chánh Truyền is a commentary on the text of the New Law by the first Caodaists in the exoteric school.

....

During the 1930s many works of Kardec and Denis were translated by the Caodaists into the Vietnamese, but they failed to translate Buddhist or Taoist texts, because Caodaist dignitaries did not know enough classic Chinese, but knew French. The Caodaists indicate that the new religion was preached in modern Vietnamese for “better understanding” (Văn từ cao xa người thường không rõ lý, rồi ra dạy cũng như không, nên đăng Chí Tôn tiện dụng quốc âm cho dễ hiểu - Introduction, Thánh Ngôn, 1964, p.3).

Summing up, it may be pointed out that the earliest Caodaist texts stress the millenarian concept of the incoming Low Era and the universalistic doctrine of microcosm - macrocosm essential unity. The concepts of social role of the new church as national Religion, the exclusivity of Vietnamese experience also are strongly emphasized. The institutionalization of the movement, the relations with the French, the anti-schism appeal also seem important in the early messages.

In sum, Cao Đài ideology was mainly cultic spiritist in content, rather than a highly developed philosophical system. Furthermore, the spiritism of the Cao Đài was drawn from the Three Religion tradition rather than from Western spiritism. In vying for privileged positions, each of Three traditions was led to syncretism. Thus, sectarian motives led to syncretic activity (Berling, 1980, p.14).

Although Caodaism drew its inspiration from the syncretic philosophy of the three religions, none of them was philosophically highly developed in Caodaism (Werner, 1980, p.11). But the syncretic and universalistic synthesis may also be viewed in terms of the dialogue between East and West or

“planetarization of culture” (Eliade, 1969, p.2). On the other hand, the syncretists are not usually ecumenical diplomats seeking peace between warring traditions; they are religious persons seeking to respond to new religious tensions and needs (Berling, 1980, p.12). It is not the fact of borrowing, but the selectivity and intention of borrowing that add to our understanding of religious thought. And the synthesis remains an exacting ideal - almost inconceivable.

Hội Văn Hóa Cao Đài - Đồng Tân Trần Thái Chân

SPIRITISM

It's a question that all religions and philosophies have grappled with over the millennia - how authentic is a religious message? The Caodaists believe they are the first religious community so far which enables the adepts to have of direct communication with transcendental world - via divine messages, "the ax for the frozen sea inside us", putting it in Kafka's words. Thus the practice of spiritism is one of the central element of Caodaism, both doctrinally and organizationally. According to Caodaism, this world is a school for the spirit (Thế gian là học đường của linh hồn - Đại Thừa Chơn Giáo, 1956, p.48). Thus the mediumism is believed to be the instrument for the establishing the new religion.

Caodaists initially used different forms of mediumism, including pneumatographie, when a written message on the previously blank paper in the envelope. On occasion, Caodaist mediums gave their messages orally. Later the Smaller and Larger Planchette, the Baked Basked or corbeille-à-bec (Tiểu ngọc cơ hay Đại ngọc cơ) were applied. The Smaller Planchette consists of a sheet of paper with 25 letters of the Vietnamese alphabet (Lê Hương, 1971, p.125). The Larger Planchette is the instrument 26 inches long, 8 inches wide, 5 inches high (Oliver, 1976, p.30). The end decorated with phoenix head is held by the mediums: the writing device was on the other end. The original Planchette used by the first Caodaist mediums was borrowed from a member of Minh Thiên sect.

For mediums receiving sacred messages all this-worldly thoughts were forbidden (Nếu chấp cơ phải để ý thanh bạch không đặng tưởng đến việc phàm - Thánh Ngôn, 1964, p.7). The mediums were compared with celestial warriors, propagating the religion (Kẻ phò cơ chấp bút cũng như tướng soái của Thầy để truyền Đạo cho thiên hạ - Ibid, p.7) - they seem to be remodeling the world with divine messages, and making towers of Babel to scale the skies with.

Every Caodaist seance involved at least 5 individuals. Pháp đàn or Pháp sư - the leader. In order to avoid the attack from the spirits, Pháp đàn cleansed the temple in each direction, he used a fresh flower to sprinkle holy water and write the traditional sacred symbols that would off the spirits. He also ritually cleansed the hands of mediums, the corbeille à bec, the table on which mediums wrote, and cleansed the entire body of the mediums symbolically by sprinkling the water over their head (Oliver, 1976, p.43).

The mediums which do not fulfill the spirits' orders can be visibly (hữu hình) punished by being inflicted bankruptcy, madness, etc. The punished mediums naturally are not permitted to continue their job. On the other hand, they also can be rewarded by some unexpected gifts - for literature, poetry (Đồng Tân, 1974, p.56). Ritual prayers were chanted before the altar where offerings were made to Cao Đài. The độc giả, the official interpreter, stood to the side of the 2 mediums and read the message aloud so the Điển ký, the secretary, could hear and transcribe into a book. During the communication, Pháp đàn knelt behind the mediums, in front of the altar. According to Đồng Tân

personal experience, the spiritual contact was like a fresh wind from above (Ibid, p 133). Seance needs perfect silence, which is maintained by pháp sư.

Spirits can communicate with mediums through the latter's hands, ears, eyes, or directly penetrate their thoughts (Giáng thủ; giáng nhĩ; giáng mục, giáng tâm). The mediums can deliver messages verbally (Khai khẩu - Đồng Tân, 1974, p.54). The Superior spirits are believed to dwell in the Palace of Jade Emptiness (Ngọc hư cung); they are presumed to communicate with mediums via the Celestial divine fluid (Thiên điển). The aim of the medium is to translate the Transcendental messages.

These seances attracted many curiosity seekers. Many of these seances took place in local Buddhist pagodas. Reports of these early seances indicate that occasionally, allegedly miraculous healing of supernatural character occurred, convincing many of to convert to Caodaism (Oliver, 1976, p.44). People at the meetings would hear their names called in a seance message and be invited to come into the building if they were outside. The seance was the most common mean of attracting converts. Those who wanted to enter Caodaism would kneel before the altar. The mediums asked permission of the spirit for the reception. If the answer were 'Yes' the convert would swear allegiance to Caodaism. But soon the church officially has stated that seance were no longer to be used for the propagation of the religion. On June 1st, 1927 it was declared that by the end of June all demonstration seances for prozelyting purposes should be stopped (Còn cuối kỳ tháng sáu đây thì phải ngừng cơ bút truyền Đạo - Thánh Ngôn, 1964, p.149). Only the official seances in Tây Ninh remained legal, reliable and divinely ordained.

The mediums were specialized in receiving certain kinds of messages: Cao Quỳnh Cư and Phạm công Tắc primarily were engaged in delivering messages on establishing the religion (Lập Đạo); Nguyễn Trung Hậu and Trương Hữu Đức - on religious laws, Mỹ Ngọc and Cao Hoài Sang - about the problems of salvation (Phổ Độ - Đồng Tân, 1974, p.56).

Some dissident Caodaist continued to use ngọc cơ in private homes and local oratories. The result was that the messages often contradicted previously acceptable doctrinal standards. For instance, Nguyễn Văn Ca was forced to leave because his insistence on participating of unofficial seances.

The general opinion among Caodaists who do not belong to Tây Ninh or Chiêu Minh Tam Thánh seems to be that the individual himself must judge a validity of seance message. This practice leads to endless confusion and misunderstanding. Some sects use 1 or 2 mediums, male or female, ngọc cơ or spoken message, allow observers or not (Oliver, 1976, p.96).

By early 1970s three types of séances were practiced in Tây Ninh:

1. Official with 2 members of College of mediums.
2. Unofficial with members of Hiệp Thiên Đài acting as mediums.
3. Personal where Hiệp Thiên Đài members practice mediumship for the development of their

personal receptivity to spirit contacts: they are forbidden to tell anyone the results. Any dignitary of Hiệp Thiên Đài can become a medium, but in order to do so he must practice (Oliver, 1976, p.91). During 1950-1970s Tây Ninh organized fewer seances: only important questions were asked. Only Tây Ninh and Chiêu Minh Tam Thánh claim that their seances are the only authoritative sources of revelation. All major sects except Ban Chính Đạo continue to hold seances. Ban Chính Đạo believe that the 1927 order was a command to terminate all seance activity. Since their inauguration in 1934 they have not held any seances.

The Cao Đài adepts often deny the existence of the direct ties between their faith and Western spiritism. But Western adepts of Caodaism seemed to be attracted to this movement in larger measure by its spiritist revelations. The most famous of them Gabriel Gobron or “Frère Gago” indicated that Caodaism was born by the spiritism.

The first Caodaists published “La Revue Caodaïste” which was addressed to “public européen qu’aux Annamites de culture française”. This magazine included short “Golden Words” - quotations from Bhagavath Gita, Allen Kardec, Annie Besant or “plus haut Mme Blavatsky” (“Les paroles d’or” : Revue Caodaïste; Février, 1931, Saigon, No 8, p. 11). The message of the spirit of Léon Denis also was published (Ibid, September, 1930, No 3, p.11). According to Allen Kardec, only pure souls are able to contemplate the divine majesty because God is everywhere (Alias L.H.D. Rivail [1804-1869]; parce que Dieu est partout - A. Kardec, Le Ciel et l’Enfer, p.32). The French spiritist believed that everybody could become medium (Tous les hommes sont médiums - A. Kardec, Le livre des Médiums, p. 476), and his books were compiled in the form of a collection of spiritist messages (Ce livre est le recueil de leurs [Esprits] enseignements; il a été écrit par l’ordre et sous la dictée d’Esprits ... Kardec, Le livre des Esprits, 1863, p. XLII).

Many founders of Caodaist movement were said to be ardent readers of the French spiritualist and theosophical authors, who also believed in God, unique and universal, omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient (“Dieu est éternel, immuable, immatériel, unique, tout-puissant, souverainement juste et bon. Il a créé l’univers” - A. Kardec, Le livre des Esprits, 1863, p. XIV). The Caodaist concept of microcosm-macrocosm essential unity was reflected not only of Ch’an Buddhism: it was also the motto of spiritist literature (L’âme humaine, parcelle de la grande Ame, est immortelle - Denis, Après la Mort, p.15). Caodaists believe that the form of religious revelation corresponds to the current level of the development of mankind - Kardec would also subscribe to that point of view (Toutes les religions ont du, à leur origine, être en rapport avec le degré de l’avancement moral et intellectuel des hommes - A. Kardec, Le Ciel et l’Enfer, p. 9).

Caodaists believe that the previous religious revelations were subsequently distorted by human interpretations. According to spiritist author, in the depths of myths and dogmas, unique and superior doctrine must be found - human religions are just imperfect adaptations of it (Du sein des mythes et des dogmes, il faut dégager le principe générateur. Alors on découvre la doctrine unique, supérieure, immuable, dont les religions humaines ne sont que des adaptations imparfaites et transitoires,

proportionnelles aux besoins des temps et des milieux - Denis, *Après la Mort*, p.11). This knowledge gives inspiration to tolerate all the faiths, the initiated is able to pray with everybody. The true religion, which is above all the faiths, rejects none of them (Denis, *Après la Mort*, p.16) .

The theosophical concept of *périspirit* was mentioned in the second message of Caodaist canon, as well as other texts. According to Kardec, human being was made of three substances, while *périspirit* was viewed as a link between material and immaterial (*Le lien ou perispirit qui unit l'âme et le corps, principe intermédiaire entre la matière et l'Esprit* - Kardec, *Le livre des Esprits*, 1863, pp. XIV-XV). *Perispirit* concept, first developed in India by Sri Ramakrishna and expounded to the West by Annie Besant, is primarily Theosophist, however the Cao Đài believers deny the influence of Theosophy (Đông Tân, 1974, p. 39). But the vocabulary of Caodaist mediumship practices tends to be translated via terms of Western spiritism (Đàn, đàn cơ, đàn tiên - séance spirit; cầu tiên, cầu cơ - séance évocatoire; Ibid, p.76).

Scholars argue that both Western and Asian spiritism have been influential in the development of Caodaist seance rites (Oliver, 1976, p.32). Western spiritism, which was practiced in Vietnam in the beginning of the XXth century, did not offer too much comparing with Vietnamese mediumship practices. Furthermore, according to a contemporary observer the practices of Vietnamese occultism during 1920s originated from the degenerated Taoism (Escalere, 1937, p.239).

The medium in traditional Vietnam believed in all mythologies, in all gods, including Buddha, all bodhisattvas, and Jade Emperor. In traditional mediumism the supreme deity was associated with the “Celestial Palace” (Known as Chí Tôn - Le suprême vénéré du Palais céleste - Thiên phủ Chí Tôn: Durand, 1959, p.29). The cult of the Vietnamese mediums did not oblige its adepts to reject the deities of other religions and to believe in its own proper panthéon.

In the traditional Vietnamese spiritism the mediums, usually female, were asked by the adepts about their immediate future (Ibid, 1959, p.7). It was believed that the deities force a medium to communicate with them (Thánh Thần bắt làm đồng). The Vietnamese mediums played very important role in all ceremonies and seasonal festivals, designed to combat evil spirits. However, the consensus emerged that Caodaism should not be simply confused with other spirit-mediumship cults in other areas of Vietnam, such as those studied by Durand in Tonkin (R.B. Smith, 1970, p. 588).

Moreover, China constituted the strongest images of “Other”, as well as “Alter Ego” of Vietnamese ideology. Putting it in the words of the French scholar, Vietnam, paradoxically, being for a thousand years dominated by the Chinese civilization, which was sincerely admired, but its own patriotism and national consciousness developed in opposition to the Chinese (Devillers, 1952, p. 13). This is why images and overtones of the ancient Chinese millenarianism has been present in Vietnam’s Three Religion tradition.

For instance, the White Lotus sectaries in China claimed that there would be only 3 kalpas, each

“governed” by the Buddha sent by the Eternal Mother. At the end of each period, those “children” who had been saved would be greeted by a Dragon Flower Assembly (Lung-hoa hui - hội Long Hoa) held in the Eternal Mother’s palace and attended by all the gods and immortals. The turning of the kalpa meant the elimination of existing society and the coming to power the followers of the Eternal Mother (Naquin, 1976, p. 14). Dipankara presides at the first Dragon Flower Assembly, assisted by T’ai-shan Lao-chun, a Taoist deity. Dipankara Buddha was believed to be reincarnated in China as Fu-hsi, inventor of the Eight Diagrams system of divination (Topley, 1963, p. 372).

Mediumistic practices have been also inalienable element of the Chinese sectarianism. The prophercies of spirits were usually written down among Chinese sectaries during late XIX - early XX centuries through Fu tsi or Fu luan mediumship. This practice included the use of wooden box with sand, which was placed in front of the altar, and writing stick. Usually three persons - san tsai, corresponding to the Three universal forces - Heaven, Earth and Man - participated the ritual. Ren tsai stood in front of the altar and leveled the surface of the sand on which Tien tsai, with his eyes closed, wrote the prophecies. Di tsai wrote down the messages on paper. the medium - tien tsai - were usually chosen among youngsters, and the text of the message was believed to be inspired by the deity, invoked on this occasion. According to the Tsin code, the organizers of fu tsi seances were to be condemned to death. The same sentence can be applied to the preachers of unorthodox Maytreya worship and Eight trigam sect, their accomplices were exiled to Yunnan, Guansi, and Guandong provinces. Exiled sectaries often sought refuge further South, Cochinchina included. However, Caodaist historian denied any ties of Caodaism with any sectarian tradition (Đồng Tân, 1974, p. 118).

According to Caodaist belief, one’s status in the spirit world is determined by one’s earthly status in the hierarchy (Oliver, 1972, p. 187). Caodaist believe in various categories of spirits: Genies, Sage, Saint, Seraphim and Buddha. The most important spirits and source of revelations in Caodaism are the Supreme Being Cao Đài, as well as Buddha Shakyamuni, Chinese poet Li Bo and Victor Hugo. Because of the frequent seance appearances to the Caodaist mediums in Phnom Penh, Hugo was named the chief spirit of foreign missions.

Many Western observers indicated universalism of Caodaist pantheon, as spiritist messages were received from Jeanne d’Arc (The “spiritist” character of Jeanne d’Arc military talent was described in the book “Vie militaire de Jeanne d’Arc” of lieutenant-colonel Collet, published in Nancy in 1920), Léon La Fontaine, Shakespeare, Aristide Briand. In total more than 70 different spirits have been viewed as suitable for communication in Caodaist groups, including Leon Tolstoi, Descartes, Pasteur, Mencius, Marcus Aurelius, Clemenceau (Pike, 1966, p. 13). As a Western observer mentioned, calendar of saints in Caodaist movement was in progress of formation (Lewis, 1951, p. 34) as de la Rochefoucauld and St. Bernard were added to the list of spirits. Prominent personalities of national Vietnamese history were also venerated (Lê Văn Duyệt, Phan Bội Châu, Phan Thanh Giản, Đoàn Thị Điểm).

The icon in the main Caodaist oratory depicts Victor Hugo (1802-1885): Sun-Yat-Sen (1866-1925), leader of the Chinese Revolution of 1911 and Trạng Trình (1491-1585) (The name of “Vietnamese Nostradamus” Nguyễn Bình Khiêm or Trạng Trình, became widely known in XX century because of his perceived prophecies about Tây Sơn rebellion, 1945 August revolution and even Hanoi take-over in 1954 by Viet Minh troops. However, Trạng Trình prophetic gift was first mentioned by a written source some 170 years upon his death, and all known manuscripts of Sấm [Prophecies] were printed only during the 1930s), Vietnamese poet and prophet - all believed to be venerated guardians of the faith. They are portrayed signing Divine Contract with the Supreme Being, stating “God and Humanity, Love and Justice”.

In late 1920s Caodaist mediums praised Franco-Vietnamese eternal co-existence. In November 1942 the message was received, urging to cooperate with the Japanese. In March 1945 a Tây Ninh medium said “East Asians should help East Asians”, in April the victory of the Japanese was predicted, but in August the same year these texts were withdrawn (Trần Quang Vinh, 1972, p. 113). Thus political overtones seemed to be present in Caodaist spiritism.

A considerable number of spirits, being objects of veneration, is understood to be a part of sectarian tradition - when deification of men became common, the number of gods increased vastly (De Groot, 1912, p.176) . Within this system, which therefore may be called polytheistic, Gods become parts of Heaven and Earth, forces and phenomena - they are all animated. Moreover, spiritualism keeps magic and the spirit of thaumaturgy alive in the advanced society (Wilson, 1973, p. 503).

CAODAIST HIERARCHY

By introducing the hierarchy, Caodaism seems to rely on charisma of the office, Amtcharisma. The Caodaists believe that adept's future status in the transcendental world is determined by one's earthly status in the hierarchy. The highest body of the hierarchy, the Council of the Great Spirits or the Eight Trigrams Palace, unlike other bodies composed of men and women, is a "spiritual community", the locus for human to commune and worship Cao Đài. This branch was believed to be "the Soul of the Religion" (Bát Quái Đài - hồn của Đạo - Pháp Chánh Truyền, Thánh Ngôn, 1972, p.299).

The Celestial hierarchy of Caodaism is headed by the Supreme Being (Đức Chí Tôn or Thượng Đế, Giáo Chủ Đại Đạo, Chủ Tể Càn Khôn Thế Giới which is known as Cao Đài Tiên Ông Đại Bồ Tát Ma Ha Tát). The Eight Trigrams Palace also includes Buddha Shakyamuni, Lao Tzu and Confucius, Quan Âm, Li Bo, Jesus Christ; the pantheon is believed to represent the Unity of Three Religions. The last three positions in the Eight Trigrams Palace are symbolically filled by the three highest dignitaries of Caodaist executive branch, representing the link between Celestial and this-worldly hierarchies (Giáo Tông, Chưởng Pháp, Đầu Sư - Trương Văn Tràng, 1974, pp.31-34). Tây Ninh dignitaries interpreted the hierarchy as "politics of the Religion" which can be divided into two parts: visible and invisible (Chánh - trị Đạo có hai phần: phần Vô hình và phần Hữu hình - Trần Duy Nghĩa, 1973, p.2). The visible part is represented by executive and judicial branches, invisible - by the Eight Trigrams Palace.

The executive branch of Caodaism is represented by the Nine Spheres Palace (Cửu Trùng Đài). Its hierarchy is described in a seance message of November 20, 1926 (Thánh Ngôn, 1964, pp.57-60). The detailed account of particular functions and duties of the dignitaries are given in the New Law (Tân Luật, pp.243-244, Pháp Chánh Truyền, pp.259-281: Thánh Ngôn, 1972).

Head of executive body is the Pope (Giáo Tông) who is believed to represent God to watch over the preservation of His Religion in this world. Whatever his age, he is eldest brother and acts as a guide for the adepts. In Tây Ninh church the rank of Giáo Tông was believed to be held by Li T'ai Po: Lê Văn Trung was "acting" (Quyền) Giáo Tông, and upon his death the position has remained vacant.

The Pope is assisted by three Cardinals - Censors (Chưởng Pháp) - one for Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian branches, three Senior Archbishops - one for each branch, 36 Archbishops (Phối Sư) - 12 for each branch, 72 Bishops (Giáo Sư) - 24 for each branch, 3000 priests (Giáo Hữu) - 1000 for each branch, and unlimited number of deacons (Lễ Sanh - The hierarchy was symbolically described as: Nhứt Tiên - Giáo Tông; Tam Tiên - Chưởng Pháp, Đầu Sư; Tam Thập Lục Thánh - 36 Phối Sư; Thất Thập Nhị Hiền - 72 Giáo Sư; Tam Thiên đồ đệ - 3000 Giáo Hữu - Trương Văn Tràng, 1974, p.75).

This-worldly Caodaist hierarchy is believed to reflect the cosmic hierarchy of 36 Heavens, 72 earths, of which the Earth is 68th, 3000 worlds (Tam thập lục thiên, thất thập nhị địa, tam thiên thế giới). According to Caodaist historian, the presence of the three branches - Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist - within the executive hierarchy symbolize the future union of all religions (Đồng Tân, 1980, p.91). During 1930s, the executive body in Tây Ninh comprised about 100 members above priest rank (Werner, 1980, p.34). It means that practically all available positions were filled.

At the Holy See, the three Cardinals of the executive body control the administration, they are assisted by three Principal Archbishops. There are nine separate religious ministries in the executive body, each having its own personnel, operational system, and offices in the administrative building. The Principal Archbishop of the Buddhist Branch is chief of the Financial (Hộ Viện), Supply (Lương Viện) and Public Works (Công Viện) ministries. The Principal Archbishop of the Taoist Branch is chief of the Education (Học Viện), Health (Y Viện) and Agriculture (Nông Viện) ministries. The Principal Archbishop of the Confucian Branch is chief of Justice (Hòa Viện), Interior (Lại Viện) and Rites (Lễ Viện) ministries.

Lê Văn Trung was instructed by the message to proclaim the following religious names: Thanh for males and Hương for female dignitaries. For the male dignitaries, their real names were sandwiched between the name of their branch (Thượng, Thái, Ngọc) and the word Thanh. For the female dignitaries, only religious name Hương was added before their real name. This pattern was not applied for Hiệp Thiên Đài officials - only their ranks were mentioned before their full names.

Caodaists believe that these names were introduced by Li T'ai Po and that the next Giáo Tông will introduce new religious names - Đạo for male dignitaries, and Tâm for the female hierarchs. Because there has not been the second Pope after the death of Lê Văn Trung, the religious aliases he had established are still used. According to the Tây Ninh dignitaries, the second Pope will introduce new names, but all those, who have been inaugurated during the previous period, will preserve their religious aliases (Lê Hương, 1971, pp.128-129; Pháp Chánh Truyền, Thánh Ngôn, 1972, p.289).

It is widely believed that Caodaist borrowed their hierarchical structures from the Catholic church (Bước đầu, 1995, p.167). However, the title of Catholic Pope is translated into Vietnamese as Giáo Hoàng, and not by the term Giáo Tông. The same should be said about other titles (Hồng Y, Tổng Giám mục, Linh mục, Chứng sinh).

On the other hand, the hierarchy of the executive body is not a single one in Caodaist church - the hierarchy of the legislative branch has no parallels in the Catholic church. According to Caodaist historian, the organizational structures of the Cao Đài are totally different comparing with the Catholic hierarchy (Đồng Tân, 1980, p.88) because of the presence of the judicial branch in the Caodaist church.

The Heavenly Alliance Palace (Hiệp Thiên Đài) is the judiciary body which has the duty of commu-

nicating with the transcendental world to receive spiritist messages, as well as to uphold the religious laws. The judiciary body is headed by the Guardian of the Law (Hộ Pháp) or Head of the Judicial Affairs - the only holder of the post was Phạm Công Tắc (before 1937- by Dong Tan, 1972, p 402). He was assisted by two high ranking dignitaries: Head of the Spiritual Realm/Religious Affairs (Thượng Phẩm - Cao Quỳnh Cư) and Head of the Temporal Realm/Secular Affairs (Thượng Sanh - Cao Hoài Sang). They led 12 dignitaries are also called college of Mediums or “Twelve Zodiacal Lords:” (Thập nhị Thời Quân. Bảo Pháp is responsible for maintaining religion [bảo tồn phép đạo]; Hiến Pháp - for beautifying the religion [toàn thiện, toàn mỹ]; Khai Pháp - for spreading the religion [truyền bá]; Tiếp Pháp - for fulfilling religious laws [thi hành pháp đạo] and considering complains [khiếu nại]. The Pháp branch is responsible for the doctrine, Đạo - for rituals and discipline, Thế - for adepts and external matters - Trương Văn Trảng, 1974, p.36).

The role of the members of the judiciary body is to act as mediums, and exercise control over the dignitaries in the administrative body. The judiciary body plays a role of intermediary between the spirits and all living creatures (Làm trung gian giữa các đấng Thiêng Liêng và chúng sanh - Trần Duy Nghĩa, 1973, p.2).

Head of the Judiciary Affairs has control over four Lords of the Zodiac, namely Tiếp-Pháp (Juridical Collector), Khai-Pháp (Juridical Reformer), Hiến-Pháp (Juridical Renovator) and Bảo-Pháp (Juridical Conservator).

The Head of the Religious Affairs controls four Lords of the Zodiac, namely Tiếp-Đạo (Religious Collector), Khai-Đạo (Religious Reformer), Hiến-Đạo (Religious Renovator), and Bảo-Đạo (Religious Conservator). The head of Secular Affairs, has control of four Lords of the Zodiac, namely Tiếp-Thế (Temporal Collector), Khai-Thế (Temporal Reformer), Hiến-Thế (Temporal Renovator), and Bảo-Thế (Temporal Conservator).

The high-ranking dignitaries of the judiciary body are assisted by eight ranks of under-officers (Tiếp Dẫn Đạo Nhơn [Instructor], Chương Ấn [Chancellor], Cải Trạng [Lawyer], Giám Đạo [Judicial Inspector], Thừa Sự [Justice Commissioner/Historian], Truyền Trạng [Clerk of the Court/Investigator], Sĩ Tải [Archival Secretary], Luật Sư [Student of Law])...

The main hierarchy of the College of Mediums was supported by “12 Skilled Academicians” (Thập Nhị Bảo Quân: Bảo huyền linh quân was to be responsible for mediumism, bảo tinh quân - astronomy, bảo cơ quân - justice, bảo y quân - medicine, bảo vật quân - supply, bảo sĩ quân - literature, bảo nông quân - agriculture, bảo thương quân - economy, bảo văn pháp quân - arts, bảo học quân - education, bảo sanh quân - social affairs. (Bước đầu, 1995, p.208; Petit Guide, 1966, p.18). But in fact only the three last positions had been filled before 1975. Only four of Thập nhị bảo quân were mentioned in the Religious constitution (Pháp Chánh Truyền - Thánh Ngôn, 1972, p.305).

The members of College of Mediums or “Twelve Zodiacal Lords” are not allowed to advance in rank

within the 12-member organisation. Once appointed within it, there is no opportunity for further advancement unless one is appointed to one of 3 leadership positions. But such appointment is still unprecedented in the Tây Ninh church. Overall, concerning the possibility of anyone being appointed to replace one of the deceased leaders of the judiciary body, there has been only one precedent so far in Tây Ninh church - Hồ Tấn Khoa was promoted to Bảo Đạo position, earlier held by Cao Minh Chương. By the present time the number of vacant positions in both branches of Tây Ninh church increased dramatically, especially after the abolition of inauguration seances after 1975.

The absolute power within Caodaist church belongs to three councils:

1. Popular council (Hội nhơn sanh), which consists of elected adepts, representatives of adherents in the ratio of one delegate per 500 members, and officials below lễ sanh. The Popular Council makes plans for the future.
2. Council of Sacerdocy (Hội Thánh), which includes dignitaries from lễ sanh up to chánh phối sư. The Sacerdotal Council examines the plans made by the Popular Council.
3. Supreme council (Thượng Hội), which consists of Giáo Tông, Hộ Pháp and Đầu Sư. All plans made by the Popular Council and favored by the Sacerdotal Council are submitted to High Council for approval. If there is a disagreement, i.e. the three Councils are not at one, the plans must be submitted through a medium for a final decision.

...

Village religious leaders- the Chanh Tri Su - were elected officials. When a new Caodaist congregation is formed, the local district representative, usually Lễ sanh, made a public announcement 7 days in advance. The requirements to be elected: good testimony, adequate time to demonstrate faithfulness as an adept, and adequate degree of vegetarianism (Oliver, 1976, p.118). The candidate should follow "Five prohibitions" (Ngũ Giới Cấm) and to practice vegetarianism at least 6-10 days a month (Bước đầu, 1995, p.197). Laymen/women who have successfully performed the duties of a full-time lay worker (Chức việc) for ten years must have papers validating this and their claim to have followed the regulations of the religion. They must also have won more than 12 converts to Caodaism and desire to devote their lives totally to religious service. These papers must have the signature of an official witness, usually their immediate superior (Oliver, 1976, p.118).

Leaders of village congregations must successfully serve 5 years and meet the same standards as other laymen so as to advance to the rank of student - priest. Ritual servants, official secretaries, choristers also can advance to Lễ sanh if they serve successfully for 5 years, meet requirements mentioned above and have a statement substantiated by witnesses that they observed vegetarianism demanded of clergy.

All the dignitaries are supposed to pass 5-years term of service in order to become candidates for

promotion (Trần Duy Nghĩa, 1973, pp.48-49). The dignitaries - Lễ sanh, Giáo hữu, Giáo sư - desiring advancement must have served successfully 5 years. They need the same basic documents for their applicants as mentioned for other Caodaists. After the records checked, advancement is not an automatic process: in the two decades before 1975 advancement in rank in all 4 branches was a slow process.

Hội Văn Hóa Cao Đài - Đồng Tân Trần Thái Chân

CAODAIST RITUALS

Syncretism may take place at the conceptual level or at the level of ritual practice - and that is the case for Caodaism. The Caodaists believe that “the religion is developing due to the rituals” (Đạo thành là nhờ lễ - Thánh Ngôn, 1964, p.103). But Caodaist ceremonies are not intended to re-create the land and regenerate time. “Rituals and Music” in Caodaism are interpreted in a Confucian sense of enforcing this-worldly social order and universal cosmic order.

On February 25, 1926 the “Great Ritual” (Đại Lễ) was introduced by a message: it includes triple ritual of offerings joss-sticks and flowers; wine; tea.

Caodaist rituals are divided into two main groups:

- 1, “Heavenly” rites (Lễ Thiên Đạo), which include the veneration of Chí Tôn and the main spirits of Bát Quái Đài. They are performed only in the places of worship, Caodaist temples - thánh thất - represent the center of adepts’ ritual activity. The main temple - Đền Thánh - reflects Caodaist cosmology: its frontal portion represents Hiệp Thiên Đài, middle - Cửu Trùng Đài, rear portion - Bát Quái Đài. The main object of veneration in Đền Thánh is situated in Bát Quái Đài - Càn Khôn globe with the image of Celestial Eye, surrounded by 3072 stars. The local temples of Tây Ninh Caodaists tend to be abridged versions of Đền Thánh.

2. “Human rites” (Lễ Nhơn Đạo), the rituals on the occasion of important events in life of every individual adept (Kinh Thiên Đạo và Thế Đạo, 1992, pp.5-19; Trương Văn Tràng, 1974, pp.59-66). Many of these rites are genetically bound up with traditional purification rituals. The big emphasis is made on funeral rituals, reflecting mutual-assistance character of Caodaist ritual life: such solemn rituals normally are too expensive for ordinary peasants. Most of the texts in the ritual book of Tây Ninh Caodaists (Kinh Thiên Đạo và Thế Đạo, 1992) connected with funeral services or ancestor-worship.

The Caodaist altar (Thiên Bàn) is designed to worship Supreme Being. It includes the Celestial Eye; the Thái Cực lamp; fruits; flowers; cup of tea, symbolizing Yin-Âm; three cups of wine, symbolizing tinh-khí-thần; water Yang-Dương; candles; incense burner. Five incense sticks of Caodaist altar symbolize Buddhism-related concept of Purity (Giới - Sila), Mediation (Định - Dhyana), Wisdom (Huệ - Prajna). Supreme Knowledge (Tri Kiến - Djnana), Liberation (Giải Thoát - Apavarga). The altar is an inalienable element of rituals in the main and local temples: it also may be established in the private homes of the adepts.

Caodaist ritual calendar provides strong arguments for the thesis that the syncretic pluralism of this teaching does not leave place for one of its elements’ domination. By 1932 ten major annual religious festivals were observed in Tây Ninh, none of which was traditional holiday celebrated in Buddhist

pagodas in South Vietnam. But by early 1970s Buddhist and Taoist festivities, memorial days of the heroes of Vietnamese history emerged among 38 annual festival in Tây Ninh (Tây Ninh main rituals [lunar calendar])

- 01/01 - Nguyên Đán - Tiểu đàn
- 09/01 - Vía Đức Chí Tôn - Đại đàn
- 15/01 - Thượng Ngươn - Đại đàn
- 15/02 - Vía Thái Thượng Lão Quân - Đại đàn
- 08/04 - Vía Phật Thích Ca - Đại đàn
- 15/07 - Trung Ngươn - Đại đàn
- 15/08 - Festival of Diêu Trì [Trung Thu] - Tiểu đàn
- 27/08 - Vía Confucius - Đại đàn
- 15/10 - Hạ Ngươn or Khai Đạo - Đại đàn
- 25 December - Christmas - Đại đàn
- 24/12 - Rite of Thần, Thánh, Tiên, Phật

Thus the process of “domestication” took place, and more traditional festivities were introduced so as to strengthen religion’s appeal in prozeliting efforts of Tây Ninh church. The political considerations also were important: national days - before and after 1975 - were marked by Caodaists as their festivities.

Annual reenactment of a series of myth-enforcing rituals effectively reiterated the claims of the Caodaism to the position of the National Religion, of the Caodaist dignitaries to its monopoly of moral authority. These rites helped ordinary adepts to feel themselves as a part of New Religion, without significant separation from the national ritual tradition. The “human” rituals also contribute to the preservation of communal values, because these rites are performed with the attendance of most of the community members - it is considered to be religious duty or “merit-making” (công quả). The assistance to correligionists in non-ritual situations also is considered to be “merit-making” in Caodaism.

(extracted from S. Blagov - The Cao Dai: A New Religious Movement - Moscow 1999)