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The Case of Caodaism in Vietnam**

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# **CULTURAL INTRUSIONS AND RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM: THE CASE OF CAODAIISM IN VIETNAM<sup>1</sup>**

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## **INTRODUCTION: RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM**

Religions do not emerge fully-formed from the mind of a single person. They are composites, reflecting and assimilating elements from the cultural and political environments in which they developed.<sup>2</sup> In rare cases, a religion is explicitly syncretistic from the beginning. The founders attempt to merge or integrate features of several different traditions, to achieve a higher-order system or synthesis which they hope will gain the allegiance of formerly disparate groups of believers. This synthesis may be accompanied by claims of 'unification', with appropriate terminology in the theology or self-identification of the religion.

One of the most striking examples of this kind of syncretistic religion is the 'three religions' tradition which developed within China since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This stream of theorizing and religious practice, which attempted to unite elements of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, has provided a fertile seedbed for sectarian innovation (Dean, 1998; Berling, 1980).

The 'three religions' sectarian tradition has also provided the foundation on which several 20<sup>th</sup> century 'new religions' in East and Southeast Asia have attempted to further develop the theology and practice of the unification of religions in the context of a final revelation from the divine realm to the founders of these new religions.

While the 'three religions' tradition within China tried to merge only features of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, adding elements of Chinese popular

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<sup>1</sup> Research for this paper was supported by a small-scale grant from the Southeast Asia Research Centre. A longer paper which includes a comparison with the Chinese sect Yiguan Dao is also in preparation, co-authored with Lu Yunfeng (who is writing his PhD dissertation on Yiguan Dao).

<sup>2</sup> Some religions now considered very distinctive were originally composites, even if their exponents denied this later. Christianity probably began as a Jewish reformist sect and only became fully separated from Judaism later, outside the heartland of Judaism, in the Greco-Roman world. Islam drew ideas, stories, and prophetic precursors from Judaism and Christianity, incorporating such material into the growing collection of revelations, while asserting that this collection provided the final set of revelations from God, completing (and superceding) revelations from earlier prophets. LDS Mormonism, originating in the Northeastern U.S. in the 1820s, combined material from Christianity with then-current folk theories about the origins and significance of the North American Indians. All of these religions were partly syncretistic and partly novel.

religion, these new religions have also been influenced by contacts over the past 150 years with non-Chinese and non-Asian religions, particularly variants of Christianity. These non-Asian religions were imported by traders and missionaries, promoted by church-sponsored hospitals and schools, and supported in some countries by colonial administrators, backed by military force when local populations or local regimes tried to resist these incursions.

The fact that a 'three religions' tradition developed in China, and that sects which evolved within this tradition eventually tried to incorporate elements of Christianity, is a very interesting development for theorists interested in the conditions for religious syncretism, and in the conditions under which encounters between exponents of different religions will lead to attempts by religious intellectuals to integrate rather than to suppress these imported religious visions. Analysis of this phenomenon also has implications for the understanding of globalization.

In this paper, I consider one of these new religions, Caodaism, which was grounded in the Chinese 'three religions' tradition, but which attempted to incorporate aspects of European Christianity and European spiritualism during the period of contact and conflict with the French in Vietnam from the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

In a later paper, I and co-author Lu Yunfeng will compare Caodaism with Yiguan Dao. The two religions share a number of features. Both were founded, in their contemporary form, in the 1920s and 1930s after extensive and disruptive experience with foreign invasions and the spread of foreign religions within their borders. Both used the unification of the 'three religions' as their primary theological foundation for further syncretic work. Both used spirit-writing as a method of revelation which provided legitimacy and authority to the founders. Both also eventually claimed that they superseded earlier revelations in other religious traditions, including those revelations and truths claimed by Christianity. Both have spread overseas into diaspora same-ethnic communities, but have also begun to try to attract persons from other ethno-religious milieux, as they attempt to fulfill the aspirations of some of their exponents who promote them as universalistic 'global religions'.

In our discussion of these two religions, we plan to review and compare their origins, development, theology, and syncretistic elements, and attempt to relate these developments to the social and historical context in which each developed. This will lead, finally, to some predictions about the circumstances under which encounters between ethno-religious groups will lead to attempts to unify disparate religions into partially novel 'unitarian' systems, and the circumstances under which such new religions can escape their ethnic origins and enter the globalized pool of religious culture.

Here I focus on the first part of this effort, an analysis of a Vietnamese 'new religion' which is one of the most extraordinary cases of religious syncretism in contemporary Asia.

## CAODAISM

### Origins

Caodaism<sup>3</sup> was founded in Saigon in 1925, and spread quickly among the peasantry in the southern part of Vietnam. Within the next three years, it gained more adherents than the Catholics had managed to convert during the previous 300 years (Werner, 1981).

The founders of Caodaism were educated urban Vietnamese men, most of whom worked during some period for the French colonial administration. Werner analyzed the backgrounds of most of the principal figures who were involved in the founding or establishment of Caodaism, and concluded that nearly 40 percent of these individuals were what she called 'upper-class dignitaries' (Werner, 1976: 18-19): landowners, entrepreneurs, and high-ranking officials. Three of them had attained the highest administrative rank possible for Vietnamese in the French colonial bureaucracy, and nine others had occupied the second highest rank. Another 37 percent of the founding group had held lower-ranking positions such as teachers or white-collar workers in the colonial administration.

We should note that women seem to have played an important role in the early Caodai movement. A number of the early spirit-writing revelations specifically acknowledge their roles and their dedication. A 'female college' was set up on the instructions of the deity Cao Dai, and a number of women were appointed to prominent positions in this college. They were regularly exhorted, during spirit-writing sessions, to keep the faith and follow the principles, and periodically praised for their dedication.

The doctrines and practices of Caodaism were originally derived from revelations received by mediums, using various techniques. The Vietnamese founders of Caodaism were aware of both Chinese-style spirit-writing (using a stick or a basket with a stick inserted into it) and European-style séances using tables or alphabet-boards. The early Caodai spirit-writers had learned and practiced spirit-writing in Vietnamese Taoist sects which used writing with a stick on trays of sand (Werner, 1981: 8), a method common in Chinese spirit-writing sects. They evidently also experimented with European methods of divination. The original revelations which directed the founding of the religion were received by mediums in Saigon in the mid-1920s. The revelations eventually announced that they derived from the supreme being, Cao Dai.

One useful source of information about the mentality of the founders of Caodaism comes from the collection of spirit-writing revelations titled the *Thanh*

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<sup>3</sup> In this paper, as in Werner (1981), 'Caodaism' refers to the religion, 'Caodai' refers to followers or adherents of Caodaism, and 'Cao Dai' refers to the principal or supreme deity of Caodaism (following Oliver, 1976). Note, however, that some worshippers refer to their religion as 'Cao Dai' – see, for example, Bui (2000).

*Ngon Hiep Tuyen* (literally, the 'collection of selected holy messages').<sup>4</sup> As in other collections of spirit-writing from sectarian groups, the messages selected for inclusion in this collection probably do not include all or even a representative sample of the messages recorded. The published versions of such spirit-writing collections typically over-represent moralistic pronouncements, and under-represent messages tailored for particular individuals or families. Further, most of the content of such collections makes little direct or specific reference to social conditions within the surrounding society. Nevertheless, such collections usually include, scattered among the general moral pronouncements, specific messages through which we can gain some sense of the local preoccupations of the spirit-writers, and of their audience (Lang and Ragvald, 1998). We can also often get a sense of the sources from which they draw their ideas and images. Hence, we will quote from *Thanh Ngon Hiep Tuyen* (hereafter TNHT) to illustrate and document the sect's philosophy and aims.

## Theology

The founders of Caodaism were familiar with features of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, and with some of the Vietnamese writers and sectarian groups which had tried or claimed to incorporate the best of the 'three religions', or to show that the three systems were simply different expressions of the same truths. The Caodaists' own incorporation of elements of these religions was opportunistic and eclectic, and made little attempt to produce a philosophical rationalization of the differences (Werner, 1981).<sup>5</sup> The founders of Caodaism were also familiar with Catholicism from their extensive experience with the French colonial regime and with local Vietnamese Catholics. The theology which they developed through spirit-writing reflects the influences of all of these religions.

We can also detect some influence from French spiritualist writers such as Flammarion and Allan Kardec, who are mentioned by Cao Dai as among the earlier prophets bringing messages to mankind in various lands.<sup>6</sup> The references to Kardec and Flamarion are particularly interesting, because they show

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<sup>4</sup> The version of *Thanh Ngon Hiep Tuyen* used here is a Vietnamese-language edition published in Vietnam in two volumes, in 1969 and 1970, acquired by the author during a trip to Ho Chi Minh City/Saigon and Tayninh in 2001. The translation of these volumes by Dr. Hum Tak Bui is gratefully acknowledged.

<sup>5</sup> Werner (1981: 6) describes this amalgamation as follows: 'From Buddhism, Caodaism adopted the Three Submissions, the Five Interdictions, the beliefs in karma, reincarnation, and Nirvana, the practices of asceticism, devotions, meditation, vegetarianism, religious purity and charity for the poor. From Taoism, Caodiasm borrowed the Three Jewels (matter, spirit, soul) and the 'Union of the Five Elements' (mineral, vegetable, water, fire, and earth). Taoist themes included the belief in spirits, magic, [and] the intervention of the spirits to promulgate and reaffirm religious laws. Confucian themes in Caodaism defined social relationships and behavior emphasizing correct comportment, the ranking of social relationships, the belief in the necessity of proper relations between superiors and inferiors, a rejection of egalitarianism, and preoccupation with rites, [and] an attachment to community, scholarship, knowledge, and tradition'.

<sup>6</sup> For example, in a message on 27 October 1926, Cao Dai asserts: 'I sent Allan Kardec, I sent Flammarion, as I sent Elijah and Jesus Christ; one is persecuted, and the other killed. By whom? By Mankind.' (TNHT, 1969: 131).

that the spirit-writers were familiar with European intellectual developments (Blagov, 2001:48). Writings by Flammarion, Kardec, and other French spiritualists had been published in Saigon in the 1920s and were well-known to many educated Vietnamese (Werner, 1981).

Kardec (1804-69), a free-lance educator and writer, had become enthusiastic about spiritualist séances during the middle decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, eventually publishing a 'Book of Spirits' (*Le Livre des Esprit*) containing his distillations of the philosophy which he believed the spirits were trying to impart. This book was widely circulated in other countries, and spiritualist writings from those countries were incorporated into later editions of the book. Early in his career, he was interested in trying to find ways to unify the Protestant sects, and this 'unifying' impulse was expressed later in his spiritualist writings.

Flammarion (1842-1925) was an astronomer who turned to futuristic science fiction and then, late in life, to séances, spiritualism, and psychic phenomena, on which he also published several widely-circulated books. He was fascinated by the prospect of communication between spirits and the living, and between spirits in different worlds.

These two French writers seem to have influenced the Caodai spirit-writers, not only because of their advocacy of prophetic spiritualist séances but also because of their visions of a new and unifying religious philosophy, and because of their belief in many inter-connected worlds. We can find all of these themes within Caodai theology.

Astronomical studies and speculations in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century also seem to have influenced Caodaist thinking, particularly, the speculations about numerous other planets and worlds beyond the earth. The Caodaist theology includes a system of progressive transmigration of souls 'upward' through 68 planets, 3,000 worlds, and 36 heavens. While the bottom end of this system (the 10 courts of Hell, below the level of the planets) reflects much older Buddhist and Taoist depictions of Hell, the upper realms of planets and worlds seems to be influenced, directly or indirectly, by astronomical discussions by European scientists.

Indeed, in providing instructions for the iconography in the Holy See in Tayninh, Cao Dai told his followers to build a giant blue globe to represent these worlds, on which they should draw the North Star and other stars, as well as Ursa Major and Ursa Minor. Cao Dai goes on to say that if they are unsure about the location of those stars, they should 'look in the Western books on astronomy and imitate the pictures of the stars' (TNHT, 1969: 44; 26 September 1926). This extraordinary endorsement of Western astronomy by the Supreme Deity of the universe suggests that the Caodaist mediums were more than impressed by science (no doubt filtered through writings such as those by Flammarion), and wished to show the up-to-date modernity of their revelations through such references.

In the spirit-writings, there are also repeated indications of what we might call a 'global awareness', particularly through periodic references to past religious developments on 'the five continents'. The founders of Caodaism adopted the thesis that a series of earlier revelations to various peoples on these 'five continents' around the world had produced partially successful religions in those lands, but had not achieved the goal of a true and complete revelation of God's will to humanity, or a religion which could provide a complete answer for all peoples and all time. Indeed, the revelations indicated that the Supreme Deity who had tried to provide earlier revelations to various parts of the world had been unhappy to see that the persons responsible for spreading the Truth on earth had not been very successful, and that humans inevitably sinned and ended up repeatedly back in Hell (presumably after being reincarnated and continuing to behave badly in subsequent lives on earth).

These earlier revelations had provided a means of 'salvation' or 'amnesty' in two major phases, but the process was incomplete. The purpose of the revelations from the Supreme Deity, Cao Dai, to this small group of intellectuals in southern Vietnam in the 1920s was to start a 'third amnesty' in that country, at that time, but designed to save all of humanity.

In one of the revelations, for example, the deity addressed his four principal disciples, as follows: 'Tr, L, K, T, Listen! Each of you four has a mission.... Your responsibility in this time of the Third Spiritual Amnesty is to save all humanity on all five continents. What a great mission! Your personality and your virtue should be commensurate with your responsibility. You are the example for all of humanity.' (dated 25 July 1926, in TNHT, 1969: 32).

The chronology of the various past 'revelations' was outlined in the revelations to show that Caodaism was the final and ultimate revelation. One passage also contains an explanation for past religious diversity. On 24 April 1926, the spirit-writer recorded a message from 'the Jade Emperor or Cao Dai...', as follows:

Formerly, people lacked transportation and therefore did not know each other. I then founded at different epochs and in different areas, five branches of the Great Way: Confucianism, Shintoism, Christianity, Taoism and Buddhism, each based on the customs of the race. In present days, transportation has been improved, and people have come to know each other. But people do not always live in harmony because of the very multiplicity of those religions. That is why I have decided to unite all those religions into one to bring them to a primordial unity (TNHT, 1969: 18).

This reference to inadequate transportation seems designed to provide a rationalistic explanation for the diversity of religions around the world in the past. When people could not communicate easily between these different regions, revelations had to be sent to each region separately. These revelations were

customized for each region, or locally interpreted by various mediators, and hence there was some inevitable diversity. But the differences cause problems when transportation improves and these formerly separate ethno-religious populations (as we would now call them) begin to interact with each other. So, now that transportation has improved, it is time to produce a more unified revelation which is suitable for *all* lands. The Supreme Being, Cao Dai, resolved to deliver these revelations himself, directly, through the spirit-writing.

Of course, the most obvious conflict between ethno-religious populations for Caodaists was between the Vietnamese and their colonial overlords, the French. Many of the founders of Caodaism had worked in various capacities in the colonial administration, and were accustomed to interacting with French officials. Thus, Caodaism necessarily had to address the disparities between the religions of the French and the Vietnamese, and to start the 'unification' project at this boundary. Revelations from Cao Dai several times addressed French-Vietnamese relations, typically when a French observer was present at the sessions.

For example, one message from Cao Dai addressed a French officer and adherent of spiritualism, Captain Monet, as follows:

Monet, arise and read.... Have I not predicted that spiritism is a religion of the future? You naturally wish to create in this country a moral relationship between the two races, French and Vietnamese, who have been called to live together, by My will, in a commonality of life and interests.... Your prayers will be heard. You will later be one of my most devoted disciples in preaching peace and harmony to the world' (TNHT, 1969: 72).

Another revelation asserts, 'the French and the Vietnamese are my two blessed races. I would like you to be united forever' (TNHT, 1969, 131).

The spirit-writers had to be careful in addressing French-Vietnamese relations, since the French colonial regime was brutal in dealing with nationalist activities, and watched sectarian religions carefully for any signs of such advocacy. Indeed, many of the peasant uprisings against French rule in southern Vietnam had been associated with cults rooted in the 'three religions' traditions (Werner, 1981: 12). The Caodai spirit-writers were trying to appeal to French observers on the basis of their shared interests in spiritualism and peaceful religious unification of races, and to avoid any suggestion that they wished to expel (rather than unite with) the French. Some French writers did in fact become Caodaists, the best known of whom was Gabriel Gobron (1895-1941).

## The Caodaist Pantheon

'Cao Dai' is the name given to the principal deity worshipped by adherents. Literally, it means 'high tower' or 'high palace'.<sup>7</sup> In worshipping Cao Dai, the religion greatly simplifies the typical East Asian pantheon or multitude of deities by positing a supreme being who should be worshipped above all other gods and spirits. While Chinese and Vietnamese popular religious traditions include a weak version of a high god – the 'Jade Emperor' – this deity is worshipped by few people, and most god-worshippers direct their entreaties to lower-level deities, possibly because the latter are considered to be more accessible to ordinary worshippers. Caodaism seems to have assimilated the Jade Emperor into the earliest versions of their supreme deity. In the first medium sessions in which he delivered messages, before the establishment of organized Caodaism, he identified himself as 'Jade emperor, alias Cao Dai, religious master of the Southern Quarter' (Oliver, 1976). Later the formal designation of this deity in Caodaism omitted any reference to the Jade Emperor.

The imagery of 'holy father' is used by some contemporary Caodai when discussing Caodaist theology in English, but some Caodai intellectuals recognize that 'father' cannot have any conventional meaning when applied to the supreme deity of the universe. In any case, the supreme deity and 'father-figure' in Caodaism absorbed elements of both the 'Jade Emperor' of Chinese popular religion and the God of Christianity. This was pointed out explicitly in some of the spirit-messages.<sup>8</sup> The supreme deity, Cao Dai, was an importation into Vietnamese religion of an essentially Judeo-Christian conceptualization of God, with powers and scope much greater than the Jade Emperor or other weak 'high-god' figures in the popular pantheon.

Caodaism also includes worship of a 'mother-goddess', known as *Duc Phat Mau*, the 'holy-mother', who represents the 'yin' aspect of creation, complementing the 'yang' of the primal deity Cao Dai. The role of the 'holy-mother' in creation has various interpretations within Caodaism (Oliver, 1976). The 'yang' principle, for most Caodai, is higher than the 'yin' principle, but some Caodai believe that 'holy-mother' represents the creative principle in the universe and produced all phenomena in space-time (e.g. Hum Bui, 2000), while the 'yang' principle is somehow above or behind space-time. In Tayninh, and in temples which follow the iconography of the Tayninh version of Caodaism, the 'holy-mother' has a separate temple-building devoted to her worship. (Some other Caodai sects do not build temples for 'holy-mother', and apparently do not follow Tayninh in ascribing such importance to this figure). It seems – though the evidence is

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<sup>7</sup> The connotations of the term and the reasons why it was chosen to represent this deity have been analyzed elsewhere. See for example Werner (1981).

<sup>8</sup> For example, on 17 December 1926, Cao Dai asserted that 'I am Jehovah of the Hebrew, God of the Israelites, the God of unspoken name to the Jews, and the Father spoken of by Christ. If you pray to me in the name of Cao Dai, your prayers will be heard' (TNHT, 1969: 73).

impressionistic – that female followers and female officials of Caodaism are particularly interested in the figure of ‘holy-mother’ (Oliver, 1976).<sup>9</sup>

Caodaism also includes veneration of a pantheon of religious or ethical leaders who brought revelations from God to various cultures, and initiated major religions. These figures are honored in the Tayninh shrine, and in other temples which follow the Tayninh iconography, in an arrangement of statues, reflecting their positions in the pantheon, on the wall at the front of the cathedral. In the center of the top row of this pantheon is the figure of Sakyamuni Buddha, flanked by Lao Tse on the left and Confucius on the right. They represent the religions or ideological systems of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

On the next level, in the center under Sakyamuni, is Li Thai Bach (the Vietnamese name for the Chinese Tang dynasty poet Li Po), flanked by the Chinese Buddhist deity Guan Yin (‘goddess of mercy’) on the left, and the Chinese deity Guan Gong on the right. Guan Gong is popular for his fierce devotion to duty, and his loyalty to his emperor. He protects businesses, police stations, and (without apparent role strain) triad organizations. Guan Yin, the female Chinese version of an Indian Buddhist deity, is worshipped particularly by women and has a reputation for mercy and compassion.

Li Thai Bach, who was a Chinese poet (Li Po) during the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D., is a strange addition to this pantheon. He would have been a familiar figure among well-educated Vietnamese early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, since they had learned the Chinese language and studied Chinese cultural history. Li Thai Bach appeared in the early séances held by the founders of Caodaism authorizing the new religion, and he eventually took up the position of the spiritual ‘pope’ (*giao tong*).

Jesus Christ appears in the next row, under the figure of Li Thai Bach but unaccompanied by other figures on the same level. Jesus is considered to be divine by at least some contemporary Caodai (Hum Bui, 2000), and some Caodai followers evidently include an image of Jesus on their home altars. In the earliest spirit-writings, however, he was mentioned only as one of the figures ‘sent’ by Cao Dai to try to save the world.

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<sup>9</sup> Oliver (1976: 8), who conducted fieldwork in the early 1970s, wrote: ‘Daily worship ceremonies are conducted ... [at the temple to ‘holy-mother’ in Tayninh], mostly by female dignitaries’. During my own visit to the ‘holy-mother’ temple in Tayninh, in June, 2000, I also observed a preponderance of women among the worshippers, and some of the Caodai men who accompanied me acknowledged that women may be more devoted to ‘holy-mother’ than some men, and that they may perceive ‘her’ to be an appealing deity for their interests and needs. But since I was accompanied by senior Caodai men, which made it difficult to interview women at the temple, and since I lacked a female translator who could interview Caodai women independently, I was not able to explore this interesting question. There are parallels with other religions with a muted ‘holy mother’ figure who is nevertheless particularly appealing to women (e.g. the figure of ‘Heavenly Mother’ among LDS Mormons). This phenomenon appears to be an important theological adaptation to women’s interests in several religions. The significance of *Phat Mau* or ‘holy-mother’ for Caodaist women deserves further study in order to integrate this case into the growing literature on the social significance of mother-goddesses.

There are a number of references in TNHT to the teachings and revelations of Jesus. Some of them make a point of noting that his revelations have not succeeded in achieving universal acceptance, or in transforming human behavior. Some of the spirit-writings also note that Christianity – as interpreted by some Christians – has brought war and conflict rather than peace and spiritual progress. The most elaborate references to Jesus among the spirit-writings suggest that Christians were probably present at those sessions. (We know that some French persons also attended some of the sessions, including individuals sent by the French colonial government to investigate the sect).<sup>10</sup>

For example, a revelation from Cao Dai on 4 June 1926 included the following: 'Christ came among you. He shed his holy blood for your Salvation. Why have you drawn away from him during the almost two thousand years of his absence? You preach his Good News without understanding it. You have weakened the meaning of his holy teachings. Humanity suffers from the whims of all these false teachers. If only they had followed the same path of Calvary as their Master... This teaching, instead of bringing peace and harmony to humanity, has brought dissension and war. And so this is why I myself [the supreme deity, Cao Dai] have come to bring you the peace you were promised. Christ can only return then. You will understand more things from my disciples. Goodbye.' (TNHT, 1969: 23). Later the same year, a revelation noted that 'The holy teaching of Christianity has only served to inflame [or increase] the ambitions of the strong against the weak, and to arm the first against the last. There must be a new teaching capable of holding Mankind in the love of all creation'. (TNHT, 1969: 131).

So, the founders were acknowledging that Christianity contained important revelations to the world, but also that Christian teachings had been misinterpreted, perhaps willfully, to justify aggression by some nations against others. This statement would carry great significance for Vietnamese, since it allowed Caodai followers to admit the virtues of Christianity while denying that those virtues provided any justification for French colonial rule in Vietnam. It also provided a justification for adhering to a Vietnamese but also universalistic religion rather than accepting the universalistic claims of French Catholics. Caodaism claimed to provide a more recent and more complete revelation which supercedes Christianity, not least because it is provided directly from God [Cao Dai], rather than through an intermediary (e.g. Jesus or some other prophet).

The Cao Dai 'pantheon' thus includes a supreme deity, a holy mother, the founders of the major Asian religions and philosophies and of Christianity, and a Chinese poet. The structure of this pantheon is intended to reflect both a ranking of spirits and a chronology based on phases of revelation to mankind. The first wave of revelations came from the founders of Buddhism, Taoism and

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<sup>10</sup> One of these individuals was a Captain Monet, identified in one Cao Dai source as a French military officer who was also interested in 'spiritualism', i.e. in séances such as those conducted by the Cao Dai. One Caodai source asserts that Captain Monet attended a number of these sessions, and claims that he was impressed (*Tim Hieu Dao Cao Dai [A Study of Cao Dai]*, by Do Van Ly, trans. by Dr. Hum Dac Bui; n.d.).

Confucianism, followed at a later time (and with somewhat lower impact and status) by Guan Yin, and Guan Gong. In a still later phase, Jesus provided revelations to his part of the world, and hence occupied a lower position. Of course, Jesus lived 700 years before Ly Thai Bach. However, it is considered that Jesus represents the last major phase of revelation prior to the descent of Cao Dai to Vietnam to initiate the most recent and most profound stage of revelation.

It seems that when Caodai missionaries were evangelizing peasant villages, they also occasionally incorporated elements of peasant folk-religion – possibly including the local village deity – into the Caodai system. An intriguing spirit-writing revelation produced in My Loc village, dated 18 January 1927, began with a message from Cao Dai, and then proceeded to a message from a figure who may be the local supernatural village guardian, and who seems analogous to the ‘earth god’ in Chinese peasant villages. This figure provided the following message to the assembled villagers: ‘Greetings to all celestial appointees [i.e. to the spirit-writer and accompanying Caodai]. Greetings to disciples and all people, male and female, of the village. I, angel of the village,<sup>11</sup> have the reputation of helping people from the four corners of the world. Having received the blessing and appointment of our Master, I am helping citizens to live in peace and order... Since the time I received the order from our Master to govern this village, I have been caring for the people with all my heart and with all my might, so that they may have a peaceful and happy life with successful crops every year’ (TNHT, 1969: 86). He goes on to say that ‘the last era is about to end; 90% of humanity will be destroyed. Alas!’, but promises that if they come together to pray, cultivate their spirituality, and ‘open their hearts for humanitarian services’ (presumably, to make some donations for Caodai activities), then they can be saved, and that he will bend ‘all my heart and my attention to taking care of the village’.

Thus, the Caodai pantheon seems to have extended from the supreme deity Cao Dai down to the level of village guardian spirits, with the latter added in some contexts to attract the interest of peasants and incorporate some of their local icons into the Caodai system.

It is possible that some early Caodai peasant followers were also Catholic, or familiar with Catholic peasant worship. The household altars of Caodai followers included a central altar (with Caodai symbolism) and two side altars for worshipping the ancestors of the husband and the wife, an arrangement also apparently used by Vietnamese Catholics (Werner, 1981: 35).

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<sup>11</sup> The term ‘local angel’ is Dr. Hum Bui’s translation for ‘than hoang’. The translator writes: ‘[The] Earth god has more limited duty [than the ‘local angel’] and responsible only for the security of the area while the Than Hoang [‘local angel’] is like a governor responsible for everything in the area from security, education, health, economy, etc.... Earth gods are usually worshipped in private houses or business while Than Hoang is worshipped in a moderately big temple (one for each village).’ (Hum Bui, personal communication, 4 January 2002).

Finally, we should note that the Tayninh branch of Caodaism also venerates their principal leader between 1934 and 1956, Pham Cong Tac, in a way which has no parallel among the other Caodai sects. The statue of Pham Cong Tac is prominently displayed over the main entrance to the Holy See in Tayninh, and also appears above his former residence (which is now a shrine) in the Holy See. He is considered by Tayninh Caodaists to have been a reincarnation of Maitreya Buddha, and thus has a more exalted status than any other Caodai official, past or present.

To summarize: Caodaism is not monotheistic, but is similar to some versions of Catholicism in worshipping a supreme deity, adding a supernatural 'mother-figure' who (for some worshippers) is nurturing and compassionate, and including a number of saints who are venerated for their holiness and their contributions to the development of religion and morality in the world, and who have some extraordinary status in heaven or in the world of spirits. These figures include deities from Chinese religions (Guan Yin, Guan Gong), deified or divine humans (Jesus), human reincarnations of saints or Bodhisattvas (Pham Cong Tac), and Chinese philosophers (Lao Tse, Confucius), and may also have accommodated local deities when expanding into some villages.

Thus, the Caodai pantheon of supreme being, holy mother, buddhas, lower-level gods, saints, and founders of major religious or ethical systems is an amalgam which seems to show the influence of Catholic Christianity, European spiritualist philosophy, Buddhism, Chinese and Vietnamese popular religion, and Chinese cultural history. But Caodaism was more than simply an amalgam of ideas and deities from various religious traditions. It was a conscious attempt to provide a religion which completed and superceded all previous local and world religions.

## Organization

The founders of Caodaism were clearly preoccupied with setting up a formal organization to carry out various activities. Some of the spirit-writings contain elaborate and detailed descriptions of the official roles and offices in the new organization,<sup>12</sup> the responsibilities and ceremonies required, and even details of the clothing for each rank in the hierarchy.

Caodaism, in the Tayninh version, has a complex hierarchical organization with ranks similar to those of the Catholic church, including (using the common English translations proposed by Caodai themselves): Pope (*Giao Tong*), Cardinal (*Dau Su*), Archbishop (*Phoi Su*), Bishop (*Giao Su*), and Priest (*Giao Huu*) (Oliver, 1976: 19). The Caodai hierarchy was much more elaborate and bureaucratic

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<sup>12</sup> For example, one message received in 1926 from Ly Thai Bach, the spiritual 'Pope' of Caodaism, includes the following: 'Thai Tho Thanh cannot be vice president and treasurer at the same time, as there should be two different signatures for any expense. You cannot have the same person authorize an expense and disburse the funds as well. This is the great Tao... Obey!' (TNHT, 1970: 4). This kind of micro-management of the hierarchy's affairs from the spirit-world was not very common, but indicates that they resorted to spirit-writing to try to resolve some disputes among officials.

than any of the other sects of the time, and clearly reflects the influence of French Catholicism. The founders of Caodaism had imported some features of the Catholic organizational model into their new religion as a kind of template.

There are also three major administrative branches which derive from the period when the main branch of the sect controlled and administered secular as well as religious affairs in the Caodai heartland in Tayninh. These latter organizational features do not directly reproduce positions or responsibilities which existed within Buddhist or Catholic hierarchies. The Caodai hierarchy included a 'College of Mediums', comprised of 12 senior officials qualified to receive revelations, which seems to be a Caodai innovation. The hierarchy also sharply differed from that of Catholicism by providing for a separate administrative hierarchy for women, with ranks similar to those of the men extending to all but the highest of Caodai ranks (which was held only by men).

A number of the spirit-writing messages were devoted to appointments to these ranks and positions, and to praise, encouragement, or mild scolding for the office-holders. If we look behind these messages about appointments, it is not difficult to see a 'desire for titles' among the leading Caodaists reflected in the messages. In one message, Cao Dai pointed out that these appointments and titles had all been arranged by the deity beforehand, and could not be attained through the methods of filling positions common in the society: 'Your names and positions are ... already arranged in the divine list. You may attain earthly positions through bribery – not so for the divine positions' (TNHT, 1969: 41).

These appointments to the Caodai hierarchy, and the attempts of the spirit-writers to control the jockeying for positions in the sect, were not always successful in satisfying the aspirations of all of the early Caodaists for positions in the new religion. Some of the early splits in the movement, in which early adherents left to set up rival Caodai sects, were the result of the failure of the deity to provide sufficiently influential positions and authority for those individuals.

### **Caodaism after 1975, in Vietnam and in the diaspora**

After the fall of Saigon to the North Vietnamese Army in 1975, the regime began to scrutinize and restrict all of the sects and religions in southern Vietnam, including Caodaism. This control included close monitoring of the Tayninh Holy See, arrests and 're-education' of some Caodai officials in the re-education camps to which many South Vietnamese were sent for months or years after 1975, confiscation of Caodai properties and buildings in Tayninh, and the elimination of some of the major bureaus within the Caodai hierarchy in Tayninh which were responsible for local matters such as education, health, agriculture, and so on. Eventually, regime-loyal persons were inserted into various official positions within the Tayninh Caodai hierarchy, and uncooperative Caodai officials ousted, marginalized, or imprisoned (see Blagov, 2001: Ch. 13). The College of Mediums was abolished, and spirit-writing sessions were prohibited

by the state (Blagov, 2001:152). Mediumship disappeared or was driven underground.

By 1975, a number of Caodai adherents had left Vietnam, before the victory of the North Vietnamese Army and reunification of the country, and many of them joined their compatriots who had settled in a number of communities overseas, mostly in the U.S. and Australia. One of the largest of the communities of diaspora Vietnamese is in Orange County, south of Los Angeles. Overseas Vietnamese after 1975 were mostly hostile toward the regime, and among many Caodai followers, this hostility extended to the new government-approved leaders who had been inserted into the Tayninh hierarchy. The Tayninh branch of Caodai was perceived as increasingly compromised and illegitimate. Meanwhile, Caodai followers tried to promote and reconstitute their religion in North America and other emigrant destinations such as Australia. A number of Caodaist congregations are active overseas.

However, the religion's literature is still mainly in Vietnamese, although translations have begun to appear, and this has proved to be a barrier for non-Vietnamese, and also for second-generation diaspora Vietnamese who do not read the language. Unlike Christianity, which could spread through the communities of the Jewish diaspora outside Palestine using texts in Greek, the common language of the great Mediterranean cities of that era, Caodai has not yet made the transition into an international language, or fully escaped the preoccupations of its Vietnamese founders. But after all, the religion is less than a century old.

In the next paper, I will extend the analysis to the case of Yiguan Dao, with co-author Lu Yunfeng, and then attempt to develop some theoretical conclusions about the impact of various types of intrusive inter-cultural contacts on religious innovation using these fascinating cases from East and Southeast Asia.

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