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CAODAI SPIRITISM

A STUDY OF RELIGION
IN VIETNAMESE SOCIETY



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CHAPTER TWO

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF CAODAISM

THE EARLIEST DISCIPLES

The Role of Ngo Minh Chieu and Other Adepts

Ngo Minh Chieu (also known as Ngo Van Chieu) was the first disciple of Caodaism. He was born February 28, 1878 in Cholon, South Vietnam. At the age of six he went to live with his married sister at My Tho because his parents had gone to Hanoi to look for work. Chieu graduated from high school in My Tho and entered the Chasseloup Laubat College in Saigon, subsequently called the Jean Jacques Rousseau school. He studied there until 1899 when he graduated at the age of twenty-one. That same year he became a secretary in the Saigon Immigration Office, and his parents returned to Saigon to live with him.

Ngo Minh Chieu had nine children, two of whom died in infancy. He worked in Saigon until 1909 when he was moved to the Administrative Office at Tan An, twenty-nine miles west of Saigon. He passed his civil service examinations in 1917 and soon became Tan An district chief. In 1920 he was sent to Ha Tien where he remained only eight months until he requested a transfer to Phu Quoc, an island off the coast of Cambodia. Ngo Minh Chieu served as district chief on Phu Quoc for four years until he received orders to return to Saigon. He worked first in -the Second Bureau, now the Commerce Department, and finally, until his retirement in 1931, as county chief in the Central Ministerial Building.

From his childhood Chieu was interested in religion. He read widely in the Asian classics and studied Western spiritism through the works of Kardec, Leon Dennis and Durville (Nguyen Tran Huan 1958: 268-9) .

His experiences with spiritism began in 1902 when, on the advice of friends, he visited a seance at Thu Dau Mot to seek help for his ailing mother. On that occasion he received a spirit message directing him to follow a religious life as well as receiving a prescription for his mother who subsequently recovered.

After transferring to Tan An, his mother became sick again. This

time, Chieu sought help at two places—a seance at Cai Khe, near Can Tho, in the Mekong delta, and again at Thu Dau Mot where he returned twice. The second time he was told that his mother would not recover, and soon after she died.

Chieu and some others interested in spiritism began holding their own seances at Tan An. During his stay he met the leader of the Minh Su movement, Mr. Lao Sung. They participated together in communal worship of Quan Thanh De Quan, one of the three spirits recognized by Cao daists as the "Lords of the earth." This spirit is especially honored by Ngo Minh Chieu's followers as the spirit who led him into the mysteries of the spirit-world. Apparently the primary goal of the seances at Tan An was the amelioration of physical suffering, for they communed with the spirits, seeking medicinal aids to cure the sick (Tran Thai Chan 1967: 57ff).

At Tan An Ngo Minh Chieu first became acquainted with the spirit Cao Dai. In contrast to others in the group, Chieu seemed to have an extreme sensitivity in religious affairs. Consequently, in February, 1920 when Cao Dai first appeared in the seance, Chieu believed the spirit's presence to be of great importance because of the tone of authoritative communication given in the seance (Toan Anh 1967: 431).

During his eight months at Ha Tien, Ngo Minh Chieu participated in many spirit sessions. Reports indicate that his presence in the seances produced spirit communication of a high level and with apparent ease and satisfaction for those involved, whereas before his arrival spirit contact had been difficult to achieve (Tran Thai Chan 1967: 66).

Ngo Minh Chieu gathered together a group of interested spiritists at Phu Quoc and began seances at the Quang Am Tu pagoda using young people for mediums. Toan Anh, who has written on Vietnamese religions, claims Chieu was absorbed with religion and read every available book on the subject (1967: 432). During his residence on Phu Quoc he received further revelations from the spirit identifying himself as Cao Dai. Obeying Cao Dai's directive, Chieu became a total vegetarian on February 8, 1921. Later, in a vision, Cao Dai gave him a revelation of the divine eye which became the symbol of the religion.

In July, 1924 Ngo Minh Chieu returned to Saigon where he met others who were interested in the spiritist movement. Among these were Vuong Quang Ky who worked in the same Saigon office as Chieu and had attended many of the Minh Thien seances at Thu Dau Mot, and Nguyen Huu Dac who worked in the same administrative building

as the other two men. They began to hold seances at various homes and others joined their group. Duncanson speculates,

Arrived in Saigon, Chieu demonstrated his methods to a widening circle of colleagues in need, like himself, of resolution of the cultural contrast between French education and their Chinese traditions--of reconciliation perhaps of their loyalty to alien chiefs with all the social pressures surrounding their daily lives (1968: 125).

After some time they located their seance meetings at Vuong Quan Ky's house, 80 Lagrandiere (now Gia Long Street). Chieu shared with the others the doctrines and rituals he had been taught by Cao Dai during his three years of discipleship on Phu Quoc. Doan Van Ban, a friend of Vuong Quan Ky, became a Caodai believer soon after being introduced to the religion. Then, in response to Ky's request, Mr. Ban allowed the group to meet regularly at his home for the Saturday evening seances, since he had a larger house than Ky (Tran Thai Chan 1967: 86-7).

Chieu taught the new adherents a simple ritual of chanting prayers and the presentation of offerings to Cao Dai. Each disciple was to observe the ritual four times daily-6:00 a.m., noon, 6:00 p.m., and midnight. All the rituals were performed in front of the altar, above which was the all-seeing divine eye of Cao Dai.

According to Caodai historian, Tran Thai Chan, people came to worship at the seances, but there was no attempt to receive officially new converts into the group through the performance of a special rite (1967: 86) . This supports the premise of the Chien Minh disciples who claim that Ngo Minh Chieu was primarily an ascetic, and was averse to making an appeal to the masses. Hue Luong, another Caodai commentator, agrees when he states that because of Chieu's ascetic life he could not allow himself to become involved with that which concerned so many people-defiling himself (1963: 19).

Among the group of adherents was Le Van Trung (1875-1934). A former elected official of the Colonial Council of Cochinchina and a member of the Conseil Supérieur de l'Indochine, Le Van Trung had lived a dissident life. He also had a "spirit completely averse to religion" (Gobron 1950: 26). There are differing accounts of his conversion. Gobron writes,

One evening, at the invitation of one of his relatives, a convinced spirit-ualist ... he went to a seance that was to take place in the suburb of Cho goa. At that meeting, it was the spirit Ly-Thai-Bach that was mani-

fested. Taking Mr. Trung aside, he revealed to him his spiritual origin and at the same time announced to him his future religious mission ... moved by grace, Mr. Trung ... sustained by his faith, had the courage to cease smoking opium and follow a vegetarian diet; he also left his business enterprises in order to consecrate himself entirely to religion (1950: 26).

Another report states that Nguyen Huu Dac, a relative, invited Mr. Trung to attend a seance at Cho Gao where the spirit Ly Thai Bach gave a significant message to Trung. As a result of this, his life gradually was changed and he devoted himself to religious affairs. The same source indicates that prior to this time, Le Van Trung had been miraculously healed of near-blindness at a seance held in Vuong Quan Ky's house. Being a close friend of Mr. Ky's older brother, Le Van Trung often had attended these seances (Tran Thai Chan 1967:36-7).

Mrs. Cao Quynh Cu notes that on January 11, 1926, a few days after the above-mentioned event, Le Van Trung came to her house to see her husband. He was a leading member of the *Pho loan*, the first group of Caodai mediums. Le Van Trung wanted officially to become a disciple of Cao Dai (Huong Hieu 1968: 37). Two of the first three Caodai mediums, Cao Quynh Cu and Pham Cong Tac, under the direction of Cao Dai made a return visit to Trung's home on January 18, 1926. On that occasion they held a seance, and Cao Dai revealed himself to Trung as the one who had previously sent Ly Thai Bach to teach and minister to Trung. Again he was urged to follow a religious life. From this time on, Le Van Trung began to take a leading role in the administration of the Caodai movement.

The Role of the Pho loan

The term "*Pho loan*" indicates a medium whose office is to be the recipient of divine law. Formerly, it was used to designate those who "received" the emperor. This term was coined by Tran Thai Chan in his *Lich-Su Cao-Dai Dai-Dao Tam-Ky Pho-Do Phan ho-hi* (1967) to refer to the first group of Caodai mediums.

In June 1925, three Vietnamese white-collar workers in the French colonial government began meeting together to investigate *table-tolimante*, "table-topping." These men were Cao Quynh Cu (1887-1929), a clerk in the Saigon railway office; Cao Hoai Sang, Cu's nephew, who worked in the customs department; and Pham Cong Tac (1893-1958), also a clerk in the customs office.

Mrs. Cao Quynh Cu (her religious name is Huong Hieu) acted as

their secretary. Her reports indicate that the first time they sat around the four-legged table with their hands resting on its surface, the table began to shake (1968: 2). In answer to the men's questions the table legs would knock on the floor. Each successive number of specific raps indicating a letter of the Vietnamese alphabet (*Ibid.* 1968:2-3).

The men developed their ability to communicate with spirits. Reports indicate that the different spirit-visitors gave messages in various languages: English, French, Chinese, and Vietnamese. Among the spirits identifying themselves were relatives, friends, heroes, patriots, and even strangers. Reports of their success in contacting the spiritworld reached others. Nguyen Trung Hau, later to become a leading member of the Caodai hierarchy, was attracted to their seance when he heard that his friend, the late Huynh Qui Cao, had appeared during a seance. Tran Thai Chan reports that Nguyen Trung Hau became a confirmed spiritist and disciple of Caodaism as a result of the evidence revealed through the mediumship of the *Pho loan* (1970: 13).

Unlike Ngo Minh Chieu, an ardent student of religion, the *Pho loan* were not well-versed in the traditional Vietnamese religions. Jean Ross, quoted in Gobron (1950: 23), incorrectly claims that they were all Buddhists. Actually, Pham Cong Tac was a Roman Catholic, and the other two men were primarily followers of the traditional family cult. They had read some Western literature on spiritism but were so naive that they did not even know what a *corbeille à bec* was (*Ibid.* 1950: 24).

During those early seances in 1925 they developed a relationship with a spirit identifying herself as Doan Ngoc Que. She introduced other spirits to the group, females who were adept at giving poetic messages. In July, a spirit called "AAA," the first three letters of the Vietnamese alphabet, identified himself to the *Pho loan* and proceeded to assert himself as a spirit of primary importance in the non-material world.

Convinced of the validity of the spirit-world and of the possibility of communication with departed spirits, the three *Pho loan* informed "AAA" that they wanted to involve themselves more fully with spirit communication. This initiated a crisis of dedication for the *Pho loan*. "AAA" demanded a public display of their commitment to him. On December 16, 1925, the three men, holding nine joss sticks, knelt outside on the sidewalk praying that "AAA" would give them sufficient grace to reform their ways (Huong Hieu 1968: 28).

"AAA" dramatically revealed his real identity to the group on

Christmas eve, 1925, after several months of communicating with the *Pho loan*. During this time he had given instructions concerning religious affairs, answered questions, and acted as an interpreter for seance messages the *Pho loan* did not understand. On this Christmas eve he claimed to be Ngoc Hoang Thuong De viet Cao Dai Giao Dao Nam Phuong (Nguyen Trung Hau 1956:8). As already pointed out, this means "Jade Emperor alias Cao Dai, religious master of the Southern Quarter." Immediately after this, the revelation continued:

Be joyful tonight on this the anniversary of my appearance to teach the religion in the West. Your allegiance to me brings much happiness to me. This house will be filled with my grace. You will see more miracles which will lead you to further honor me For some time I have used the symbol AAA to lead you into the religious life. Soon you must help me establish the religion. Have you seen my humility? Imitate me so that you may genuinely claim to be religious men (Tran Thai Chan 1967: 90).

On January 1, 1926, Cao Dal emphasized his identity more strongly by claiming to be another revelation of Jesus "The one who shed His blood because of His love for the world" (*Ibid.* 7.967: 91).

Already by the end of 1925 the *Pho loan* had grown to include several others who were mediums. By this time they often met in two groups, one using the *xay ban* (table-topping) and the other the *ngoc co* (*corbeille à bec*).

Contact occurred between members of the *Pho loan* and the followers of Ngo Minh Chien. Nguyen Trung Hau often ate at Chien's house, Vuong Quan Ky, one of Chien's first converts, began to meet regularly with the *Pho loan* as the result of a seance session they had held in which Ky's father appeared with a message for him. In January 1926, the *Pho loan* mediums were directed by Cao Dai to seek Ngo Minh Chieu and receive instructions from him. They were told that he was to be their leader (Nguyen Trung Hau 1956: 9). Chien taught them how to construct the Caodai altar from the pattern oven him on Phu Quoc. He gave them copies of prayers to replace the ones borrowed from the Minh Thien which the *Pho loan* had been suing (Tran Thai Chan 1970: 40).

On January 27, 1926 they held the first seance under the direction of Ngo Minh Chien at his house on Bonard Street. For the next three months they practiced spirit communication and the worship of Cao Dai. This apparently harmonious relationship did not last long. Conflict occurred among the leaders of the movement.

Division: The Two "Schools" Of Caodai Thought

The result of this conflict was that Ngo Minh Chieu separated from the *Pho loan*. With a few followers he dedicated himself to the pursuit of personal holiness through a life of quiet asceticism. Ngo Minh Chieu chose the life of an ascetic; seeking to cultivate within himself those necessary religious characteristics that would guarantee his escape from rebirth, and entrance into a heavenly union with Cao Dai. Within the Caodai movement, and among students of Vietnamese religions, there has been misunderstanding about this split in Caodaiism. The reasons for this division are discussed in Chapter IV. This division resulted in the formation of two radically different schools of Caodai thought. One has been called the "exoteric," and the other, "esoteric."

The distinction between these two schools of thought is one based upon the differing goals, values, and methods of the followers of Caodaiism. The "exoteric" school is characterized thus:

Organisme de propagation et "d'évangélisation" par excellence, l'Ecole Exotérique s'adresse au grand public sans préparation spéciale Elle se préoccupe de la vie sociale, dirige la formation religieuse des néophytes, oriente les aspirations spirituelles des adeptes, pour lesquels le salut ne peut être obtenu que par la dévotion, la pratique de la vertu et la Grâce divine (Luoc Khao Can Nguyen va Giao Phap 1966: 24).

Whereas the "esoteric" school is:

exclusivement réservé aux élus, sélectionnés personnellement par le Maître Divin dans le calme et le silence du Sanctuaire, ce cycle d'enseignement ne dispose ne de temples, ni de sacerdoce, ni de liturgie, ni d'organisation matérielle. Le disciple, lié par un voeu irrévocable, sévèrement et longuement préparé à l'adepte, renonce aux honneurs, aux richesses, à toutes les jouissances de la vie terrestre, pour s'adapter aux rigoureuses conditions d'existence imposées par la discipline religieuse... en vue d'obtenir une extinction progressive de son "moi inférieur," partant, son identification avec l'Absolu, son intégration au DAO, à l'infini (Luoc Khao Can Nguyen va Giao Phap 7966: 26).

The "exoteric" is called *pho do* (to ferry across, to help others) and the "esoteric" is *vo vi* (inaction). The emphasis of the former is the propagation of the Caodai message to win converts and change the world. The latter school's emphasis is self-cultivation of the inner life by progressive eradication of the inferior self, and the resultant development of the divine element within the self. (This differentiation is discussed further in Chapter 111) .

THE GROWTH OF CAODAISM TO 1932

Methods and Results of Propagation

After Ngo Minh Chieu's departure from the *Pho loan*, Le Van Trung, with specific direction from seance messages, began to assert administrative leadership over the fledgling movement. Savani states,

Après avoir rapidement éliminé le trop naïf Ngo Van Chien, prit en main la direction de la secte naissante faisant confirmer par les révélations de la Corbeille à Bec la mission personnelle dont il avait été investi par la divinité (1955: 75).

Under Trung's direction, the new group sought to expand their religion by holding seances in the suburban and rural areas. The Caodai historian, Tran Thai Chan, claims that this plan was initiated by instructions via the seance (1970: 74). At each location, two mediums belonging to the *Pho loan* conducted a worship and seance session. M. Dujéil notes that in these meetings "on n'a pas manqué de recouvrir aux pratiques secondaires: miracles, eaux de guérison, imposition des mains, prédiction par médium ou par la corbeille à bec" (In Huan 1958: 276).

By May 1926, Le Van Trung sought government permission to open twenty-one "oratories" in east and central Cochinchina (Smith 1970: 340); Cao Dai had given instructions that the original meeting place at Doan Van Ban's house in Can Kho was to be expanded to five other locations. The organization, location, and sponsorship of these meetings were as follows:

1. Cau Kho: The leader was Vuong Quan Ky who received help from Doan Van Ban and others. The mediums were Nguyen Trung Hau and Truong Huu Duc. The meetings were held at Doan Van Ban's home.
2. Cholon: The location of the meeting was Le Van Trung's house. He and Le Ba Trung directed the meetings and Cao Hoai Sang and Cao Quynh Dieu were the mediums.
3. Tan Kim: Nguyen Ngoc Tuong and Le Van Lich directed the services at Nguyen Van Lai's house. Ca Minh Chuong and Nguyen Van Tuoi were the mediums.
4. Loc Giang: Services were held at the Phuoc Long pagoda; Yet Ma Giong and Mac Van Nghia led the meetings and Tran Duy Nghia and Truong Van Trang were the mediums.

5. Tan Dinh: Held at Nguyen Ngoc Tho's house, the seances were directed by him. Cao Quynh Cu and Pham Cong Tac were the mediums.

6. Thu Duc: Ngo Van Dieu directed the meetings held at his house. Huynh Van Mai and Vo Van Nguyen were the mediums.

A special place, the home of Tran Van Ta, was selected for services held exclusively to heal the sick (*Tieng Viet* No. 1659:1).

Writing in a Vietnamese newspaper, Nguyen Trung Hau indicates that meetings were held at many other locations to spread the religion to new adherents (*Tieng Viet* No. 1659: 1). The response to the new religion was impressive. Fifteen of the twenty-one "oratories" for which Le Van Trung requested government permission in May 1926 were in Saigon, the provinces of Gia Dinh and Cholon (adjoining Saigon), Tay Ninh and Bien Hoa. The other six "oratories" were in the central provinces of the Mekong delta at My Tho and Ben Tre (two each), Sa Dec and Vinh Long (Smith 1970: 342).

The Caodai method of propagation during these months was not haphazard. Le Van Trung divided his leadership into three groups and sent them into the provinces of South Vietnam. They returned to the Tu Lam Tu pagoda at Go Ken, Tay Ninh, in time for preparations for the official inauguration of the religion on November 18, 1926 (Toan Anh 1967: 411).

Statistical data on the growth of Caodaism during these earliest years is unreliable and confusing. Nguyen Van Tam states they won almost 30,000 converts in six months. By October 1926 the membership had increased to 50,000 (1949: 4-5). Duncanson, who is critical of the Caodai, insinuates that Le Van Trung, as a labor contractor of some frame, was able to muster the claimed 50,000 people present at the official inauguration. He implies that these members must be considered to be questionable "followers." (1968: 125-126). In 1928 Le Van Trung claimed over one million followers. In the same year, the newspaper *L'opinion* published a membership figure of 700,000. This figure was rejected by Maurice Monribot in *La Presse Indochinoise* who wrote that there were only about 200,000 Caodai members (Smith 1970: 341).

Nguyen Tran Huan writes that by 1931 the Caodai had about 500,000 followers (1958: 273). Other writers have contradicted this estimation. For example, Ellen J. Hammer believes that the Caodai had over one million followers by 1930 (1954: 79); Meillon in *Les Messages Spirites* states that by 1930 the Caodaists consisted of about

one-eighth (500,000) of the entire South Vietnamese population (1962: 14) ; G. Abadie writes that in 1932, Caodaism's followers in Cochinchina numbered "more than one million out of three and a half million inhabitants" (Gobron 1950: 103).

The divergence of opinion on the actual numerical strength of the Caodai from 1925-1932 seems to indicate reluctance, on the part of some, to admit the success of Caodaism. On the other hand, extravagant claims by others suggests a defensive posture in the face of criticism. These inflated estimates were an attempt to over-exaggerate the movement's success and to improve the image of the religion for the public. The author believes a conservative estimate of Caodai membership (adults and children) in 1930 is 500,000. In any case, even in terms of the most modest estimates, the rapid growth in the early years is significant.

The involvement of Cambodians is important when analyzing the early growth of Caodaism. In 1927 the Caodai officially opened a "foreign mission center" in Phnom Penh on Lalan de Callan street. At first, this center was directed by Pham Cong Tac. The first officials were chosen by seance directive on July 27, 1927. Caodai officials claimed that 10,000 Vietnamese living in Cambodia were converted to the religion during the first year.

Many Cambodians living near the South Vietnamese border joined Caodaism. The Caodai erected a huge statue of Siddhartha at the entrance to their new property purchased in early 1927 at Long Thanh, Tay Ninh. Reports state that thousands of Cambodians came to see the statue because rumors developed that it was a representation of one of their old Cambodian monarchs who reputedly would return to restore a golden age in Cambodia. The Cambodians worshipped Buddha and sought further blessings through Caodaism. Thousands came to Long Thanh to worship and work on the new site of the holy see. Local police reported as many as five thousand Cambodians at one time sitting around the statue of Siddhartha (Le Huong 1969: 95; Le Van Trung 1931: 41) .

Laws were passed by the French to stop these mass defections by Cambodian Buddhists. King Monivong of Cambodia signed a decree (April 1, 1930) forbidding conversions to Caodaism and restraining Caodaists from propagating in Cambodia. Caodaism was not accepted as one of the officially recognized religions (Le Huong 1969: 95-6). In spite of official French and Cambodian harassment, the Caodai reported over 30,000 converts in Cambodia by 1937 and 70,000 by 1951 (64,954 Vietnamese and 8,213 Cambodians) (*Ibid.* 1969: 98-9).

Reasons for Successful Growth

According to Pham Cong Tac, the leader of the spiritual branch of Caodaism until 1958, seance communication served a four-fold purpose: to establish the religion in the early stages of development; to provide the laws and sacred revelation; to aid in the propagation of the Caodai message; and to teach the mysteries of Caodaism (Tran Thai Chan 1970: 163-4).

Every Caodai seance involved at least five individuals. First, the *Phap Dan* or *Phap Su*, the spiritual leader of the meeting, had to see that all the necessary arrangements for the seance had been made. Were the altar accoutrements correctly in place? Were there a sufficient number of officials to hold the seance? Was there any evidence of -the presence of evil spirits? To avoid attack from the spirits, the *Phap Dan* cleansed the temple in each direction. He used a fresh flower to sprinkle holy water and write the traditional sacred symbols that ward off the spirits. He also ritually cleansed the hands of the mediums, the *corbeille à bec*, the table on which the mediums wrote, and cleansed the entire body of the mediums symbolically, by sprinkling the water over their heads.

Ritual prayers were chanted before the altar where offerings were made to Cao Dal. The seance began with specific prayers requesting that spirit communication would be fruitful. The two mediums sat facing one another with their hands holding the *corbeille à bec* under the lattice work, the writing end of the instrument hovering above the table. When the mediums received a revelation the head of the *corbeille* was lowered to the table and the message written.

The *Doc gia*, the official interpreter, stood to the side of the mediums and read the message aloud so the *Dien Ky*, or the secretary, could hear and transcribe into a book. During the communication, the *Phap Dan* knelt behind the mediums, in front of the altar.

These seances attracted many curiosity-seekers. To stand outside and view the proceedings or to enter and kneel soberly was not unusual for the Vietnamese. Many of these seances took place in local Buddhist pagodas. The populace was also familiar with various types of seance communication, spirit-inquiry, and astrological observations.

The types of communications given through the seances differ in content, quantity and quality. Some examples are:

A message from Jesus Christ: It is I your Saviour who am coming, I your judge. I come as before, among the scattered Sons of Israel to

bring truth and dissipate darkness. Listen to me. Spiritism, as I said before, is to bring back to materialist minds that above them reigns unchangeable truth. The good God, the great God who makes plants to germinate and causes floods to occur or rise up. It is I who have revealed the divine doctrine; I, like a harvester have gathered in the good scattered throughout humanity, and I have said come to me all you who are suffering ... Spiritists, love one another, that is the final teaching (Le Van Trung 1931: 5-6).

A message from Cao Dai (Wednesday, October 27, 1926): Humanity is suffering all kinds of vicissitudes. I have sent Allan Kardec; I have sent Flammarion, as I have sent Elijah and John the Baptist, precursors of the advent of Jesus Christ. The one they persecuted, the other they killed. Who did it? Humanity. Even my son was killed by you; you do not worship Him in spirit or 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 do not care to listen. Now I must make use of a greater spiritual agency to convince you The French race and the Annamite race are my two beloveds. I wanted you to be united forever That is enough for you this evening (*Ibid.* 1931: 8).

A message from Victor Hugo to Pham Cong Tac (April 20, 1930) in answer to the request, "I wish to be instructed concerning the origin of our Master and His power": ... Let us suppose that the creator, in his beginnings, in reality lived in one of these universes, His spirit also had to make a long ascent; from matter, He became man, then a sage, He passed through the grades of the spirit class, and entered at last into the mystery of Creation ... (Gobron 1950: 54).

Reports of these early seances indicate that occasionally, allegedly miraculous healings occurred of supernatural character, convincing many to convert to Caodaism. I talked with a well-known, retired university professor who stated that as a young man, unknown to anyone, he had attended a seance. Suddenly, during the seance, his name was called and the spirit indicated he was to live a religious life by following Cao Dai. This convinced him that the spirit communication was valid and he should become a Caodaist.

The seance was the most common means of attracting converts. People at the meetings would hear their names called in a seance message and be invited to come in to the building if they were outside. Often they would be given a spirit message (*bai thi*) in verse, sometimes a four-line poem. The poem would be applicable to the individual who would then request permission to join the religion (Tran

Thai Chan 1967: 98). Those who wanted to enter Caodaism would kneel before the altar. The mediums, acting as intermediaries, asked permission of the spirit for the reception of the individual. If the answer were "yes," (*thau*) instructions about the religion were given and the convert would swear allegiance to Cao Dai.

The seance was a powerful force in winning new converts to Caodaism. In *Le Caodaïsme ou Bouddhisme Renové*, the author states that it was spiritism's grace, the love of God manifested in the seance, and the decisive influence of the messages in the seance which brought mass conversions (1949: 11). Huan writes that the seances attracted the attention and excited the curiosity of the people. They desired a fellowship with God because they were under the yoke of oppression (See Huan 1958: 270ff). Finally, Caodaism did not greatly contrast with other religions or violate local customs (*Dai Chung* No. 119, 1961).

Other reasons for the early success of the movement have been suggested, such as: (1) appointing well-known personalities to be in charge of local Caodai chapters (Fall 1955: 237); (2) an individual's advancement in the hierarchy depended on his success in winning converts (Dutton 1970: 4); (3) the opportune move to Long Thanh where the holy see was located (Toan Anh 1967: 414); (4) the applicability of Caodaism to the religious needs of the masses who were disenchanting with other religions:

Les racines de leur influence sont profondément ancrées dans la masse de leurs adeptes en raison de leur caractère mystico-religieux qui fait vibrer les cordes secrètes d'un peuple lassé d'un bouddhisme traditionnel qui ne répondait plus à ses aspirations profondes (Savani 1955: 72).

and, (5) the possibility of Caodaism being a secret-society and thus accruing the benefits of popular approval and support (*Ibid.* 1955: 88).

Seeking Governmental Recognition

By October, 1926 the Caodai leadership believed they were strong enough to apply for official government recognition. And so on October 7, 1926 a letter was written to Mr. Le Fol, the Governor of Cochinchina. This letter, a declaration issued on instructions received from Cao Dai in a seance on September 28, 1926 was signed by twentyeight officials and 247 adherents (Toan Anh 1967: 411; *Thanh Ngon Hiep Tuyen* 1964: 29-30).

The French government accepted the application and indicated that the document would be studied. Among those signing the document were Le Van Trung; Le Van Lich, the former head and religious master of the Minh Duong; Tran Dao Quang, the religious master and former leading official of the Minh Su organization; and high ranking civil servants such as Le Ba Trang, the district chief of Cholon.

The letter of application briefly stated that Caodaism was a new religion only in the sense that it complemented and perfected the three ancient religions of Vietnam which had failed to complete their assigned task in Vietnam and the world. Cao Dai was identified as the universal Creator who had chosen to communicate His teachings in this era via spirit agents and mediums. The letter also stated that the goal of the religion was to propagate the new teachings in a spirit of peace and mercy (Tran Thai Chan 1970: 179-181).

While legal recognition by the French authorities was not given until 1939, and later, Georges Mandel, the French official who granted this formal recognition, was criticized as being "ill-informed" by Admiral Decoux (1949: 235), nevertheless, Cao Dai gave instructions that the disciples were to prepare for the public inauguration of the religion in early November, 1926 (Thank Ngon Hiep Tuyen September 18, 1926). These ceremonies were held in a pagoda at Go Ken, Tay Ninh, approximately three miles south of the provincial capital. The pagoda was given to the Caodaists voluntarily by a Buddhist monk Hoa Thuong Nhu Nhan who previously had been appointed to a high position in the Caodai hierarchy.

Thus on November 18, 1926, the religion was inaugurated with vivid ceremonial display. French officials, military officers, civilian administrators, and a reputed 50,000 followers and curiosity-seekers were present. On this formal occasion, the Caodai hierarchy wore their new, official ceremonial robes and were consecrated before the public. Ngo Minh Chieu was not present at the ceremony. The papal throne was empty. The highest ranking administrative officer was Le Van Trung, the interim cardinal (Thuong Dau Su). Theoretically three men outranked him, the juridical cardinals (Chuong Phap). Yet, at this time, these officials seemed to have only ceremonial status.

Not long after the official inauguration, the owner of the Tu Lam Tu pagoda at Go Ken had a change of heart, probably prompted by the insistent demands of the Buddhist laity who had funded the erection of the building. He asked for the pagoda to be returned to him as soon as possible. This caused the Caodai leadership some consternation-

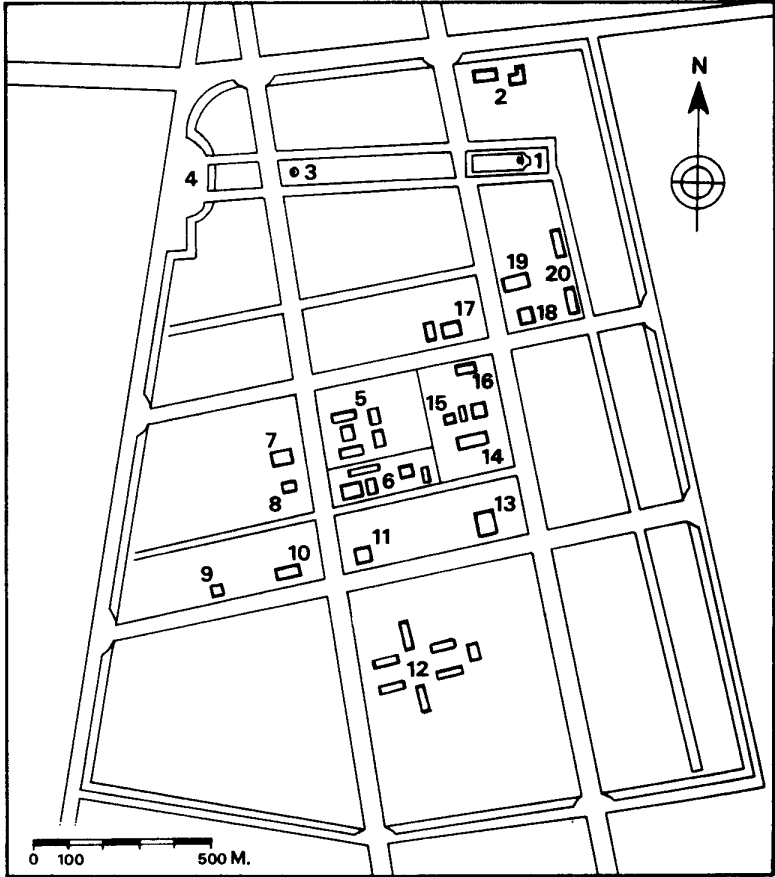


Fig. 8. The Tay Ninh holy see.

Key:

- | | |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Temple | 11. Secular Affairs Offices |
| 2. Administrative Offices | 12. High School |
| 3. Statue of Buddha | 13. Popular Council Building |
| 4. Main Gate | 14. Holy Mother Temple |
| 5. Hospital Complex | 15. Superior's Residence |
| 6. Social Affairs Complex | 16. Office of Legislative Branch |
| 7. Ritual Servants Residence | 17. Papal Residence |
| 8. Orphanage | 18. Lecture Hall |
| 9. Musicians Residence | 19. Female Cardinal's Residence |
| 10. Mortuary | 20. Dining Rooms |

nation. However, under the leadership of Cao Quynh Cu, and with money supplied by Nguyen Ngoc Tho and his wife, Madame Lam Thi Thanh, they purchased land at Long Thanh, Tay Ninh for the erection of a permanent temple for the holy see. Madame Lam Thi Thanh, the former Madame Monnier and a wealthy woman, was invested as the highest woman dignitary of Caodaism in 1926. She became a cardinal.

Within four months they moved to Long Thanh in the district of Phu Khuong, Tay Ninh, about three miles from the provincial center. (Fig. 8).

Under the direction of Cao Quynh Cu, the Caodaists immediately began to construct a temporary temple, cooking and sleeping quarters for the laborers who were helping. The area was covered with forests.

In the early months of 1927 the Caodai leadership was scattered throughout South Vietnam. Pham Cong Tac, the Ho Phap, leading member of the spiritual branch of the religion, was sent to Phnom Penh to oversee the opening of the Foreign Mission Center. Cao Quynh Cu was directing the development at Long Thanh. Le Van Trung, in charge of the propagation of the movement, was in Saigon. He seemed to be the chief apologist for the movement, replying to Caodai critics such as George Outrey. Outrey, the Cochinchina deputy in the French Assembly, later apologized for what he said were unwarranted attacks on Caodaism (*Revue Caodaiste* June 1932: 12).

The Caodai Sacred Texts

During this time the Caodaists continued their plan for the propagation of the message in the provinces around Saigon until they received further instructions through the seance. They were told that the establishment of the movement had been accomplished successfully, and the movement should enter a new stage where the seance would be used to give the major sources of revelation to the religion.

These new sources were the *Phap Chanh Truyen* (Religious constitution), the *Tan Luat* (New law), and the *Thanh Ngon Hiep Tuyen* (Compilation of Divine messages). Most of the sacred literature of Caodaism is found in the last mentioned of these three, the *Thanh Ngon Hiep Tuyen*. This is a two-volume compilation of sacred messages given to Caodai leaders through seances. These messages were first received in 1925, most of them between 1925-1929. Of more than 170 separate communications in the official *Thanh Ngon Hiep Tuyen* (1965-66), only 22 were given in the 1930's, two in the 1950's, none in the 1940's. Most of these messages were in Vietnamese but some were in French and a few in Chinese.

One of the major problems for the Tay Ninh church was their inability to control the use of the *corbefe à bec* by either dissident, curious, or stubborn Caodai believers. In 1927 the church officially had stated that seances were no longer to be used for the propagation of the religion. Only the official seances held at Tay Ninh were legal, reliable, and divinely ordained. The leadership also received pressure from the French who had forbidden unofficial seances and threatened that those who disobeyed would be punished (Tran Thai Chan 1970: 144).

Some dissident Caodai followers continued to use the *corbeille à bec* in private homes and local temples. No official mediums from the church were used at these seances. The result was that the messages often contradicted previously acceptable doctrinal standards (*Ibid.* 1970: 145-6). This necessitated a re-evaluation of all the messages received.

At this time, in the early 30's, the Tay Ninh leadership selected a committee to investigate the various communications in the unofficial *Thanh Ngõn Hiep Tuyen*. This corpus was the entire group of messages claimed by various people to be authentic and authoritative. The concern was to eliminate spurious and unreliable messages (*Ibid.* 1970: 164). This committee officially validated all the genuine communications and included them in the *Thanh Ngõn Hiep Tuyen*. It included a few additional messages given after this time and the eight "*Nghi Dinh*" (official decrees), highly provocative and questionable pronouncements which originated from seances conducted at Tay Ninh under the leadership of Pham Cong Tac.

Excluded from this official directory of sacred texts were a number of messages which are secret and known to only a few; for example, the seance message in which Ngo Minh Chieu, the first Caodai disciple, was excommunicated from the church.

Part of the *Thanh Ngõn Hiep Tuyen* are two separate revelations, the *Phap Chanh Truyen* and the *Tan Luat*. The *Phap Chanh Truyen* was given in two seances on November 20, 1926 and February 13, 1927. The first section of this religious constitution deals with the administrative and executive branch of the church. The second section is about the Hiep Thien Dai, the branch of Caodaism concerned with spiritual and legislative affairs, and the protection of the sacred law.

The actual text of both sections deals with the various hierarchical rankings, the qualifications and responsibilities of each office, and the various ceremonial apparel to be worn by the elected officials. Not

included in the *Thanh Ngon Hiep Tuyen* but part of the *Phap Chanh Tuyen* (as published at Tay Ninh) is a commentary on the text by the Ho Phap, Pham Cong Tac. An example of the text and commentary is,

Text: The Juridical Cardinals have the right to examine the religious laws before their promulgation so that even if they originate from the Pope, they are verified by the Cardinals.

Commentary: In the ranks of the *Czau-Trurzg-Dai*, the Pope represents the divine spirits to supervise the exercise of the divine religion. He has the right to make laws, a supreme right which the divine spirits have conferred on him. The Cardinals represent the mass of followers. They contain the authority of the mass. The Pope and Cardinals must join together always to consolidate the work of the creation of the world, which consists in unifying God and man (*Phap Chanh Tuyen* 1964: 41).

The commentary by Pham Cong Tac is officially considered to be inspired, but other sects, including some members of the Tay Ninh organization, do not regard it as authoritative. Included in the *Phap Chanh Tuyen* is a sermon by Pham Cong Tac. This sermon is considered to be in the same vein as his written commentary.

The *Tan Luat* is accepted by Caodaists as the final, authoritative statement of divine law governing secular and religious life. It was compiled by a number of church leaders, including Pham Cong Tac, Nguyen Ngoc Tho, Nguyen Trung Hau, Nguyen Ngoc Tuong, and Le Van Trung. In seances on December 20 and 24, 1926, Cao Dai instructed them to prepare the new laws for the religion. He ratified their efforts in a seance message on January 16, 1927, accepting the *Tan Luat* in its entirety. The foundation for the new law is found in two sources, the revelations given by spirits through the Caodai seances, and the sacred books of other Asian religions (Tran Thai Chan 1970: 111).

The *Tan Luat* is divided into three sections, the laws governing religious, secular, and monastic life. Such topics as the responsibilities of all officials of the Cuu Trung Dai, the establishment of local congregations, the five interdictions, religious education, and punishments for failure to observe the law are dealt with in Section I. Section II gives instructions for disciples with regard to secular affairs, marriage, death, and social relationships with co-religionists and those who are not Caodaists. The third section gives directives to those interested in

entering the monastic life. Although they have made provision for it in their laws, Tay Ninh has few individuals involved in such pursuits.

An additional compilation called the "Eight Decrees" is not included in the three major sections of the *Tan Luat*. On November 22, 1930 in a seance communication, the spirit, Ly Thai Bach recalled the leading members of the Tay Ninh hierarchy to the holy see for a special seance at the temple. Six decrees were formulated at this time. These included the elevation of Le Van Trung to acting pope, the allocation of new responsibilities to other members of the hierarchy, and the delegation of strong executive powers to Le Van Trung and Pham Cong Tac. This legislation effectively negated the necessity of these two men having to seek the advice and consent of other previously instituted legislative bodies when they wanted to promulgate new legislation (*ibid.* 1970: 146ff).

Another two "decrees" were added later; they were more controversial for they included a statement clearly aimed at dissident Caodaists. Decree No. 8 stated that those not adhering to the Tay Ninh church and its doctrine were excommunicated. All these decrees were reputedly made on the basis of seance communications and the authority of Ly Thai Bach, the spiritual pope. The impact of this decree on those Caodaists not following the Tay Ninh organization is discussed in Chapter IV. The severity of the pronouncement indicates why this addition to the original *Tan Lusat* is not accepted as divinely inspired by many Caodaists.

In order that the reader may get an in-depth view of the Tay Ninh church, Chapter III gives a structural description of the Tay Ninh organization. Because some of the analysis is detailed, the section on the composition and responsibilities of the nine administrative ministries, and another section on the advancement process are included in the appendices. Then, the organizational, hierarchical, and ritual structure of the Chieu Minh sect is compared to that of the "mother" organization at Tay Ninh. This will indicate a contrasting perspective of another key Caodai group, very different from that of Tay Ninh.