

1. Caodaism as history, philosophy, and religion
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PREFACE

I am deeply indebted to several people in the preparation of this paper. Special thanks must to Mr. Le Van Cang and Dinh Nhut Thanh to facilitating my trips to Can Tho and Tay Ninh. These trips were rewarding from every standpoint. In Can Tho I was able to visit the grave of Ngo Minh Chieu and the Chieu Minh Dan temple there. In Tay Ninh, I was able to observe the magnificent spectacle on the Holy See.

Without the assistance of Mr. Tran Thai Chan and his Caodaist Cultural Association, this paper would never have been a reality. Mr. Chan introduced me to members of the Esoteric School in Saigon and graciously agreed to answer of myriad questions I put to him in written form. To those who collaborated with Mr. Chan in answering my not always easy questions, and those who laboriously translated the answer into English, I express my deepest appreciation.

Realizing that much of the information contained in certain sections of the paper came form interviews and not published material, I would beg the reader's indulgence in the occasional scarcity of footnotes and other documentation which permeates the paper.

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I. A SHORT HISTORY OF CAODAIISM

Caodaism had its origins among Vietnamese officials of the French colonial administration who had developed a deep and profound interest in the occult. In 1919 at the village of Tan An in the Mekong Delta, Cao Dai (High Palace) the Old Immortal revealed himself for the first time to a group of these officials, one of whom was Ngo Van Chieu the founder of Caodaism. Chieu was a mandarin prefect or colonial administrator on the island of Phu Quoc off the southwest coast of what was then Cochinchina. Chieu continued to communicate with the spirit of Cao Dai though at that time the identity, of the spirit was not known. Revealing himself through an adolescent medium, Cao Dai first signed his messages: A A A (the first three letters from the Vietnamese alphabet). At the Quan Am Tu Pagoda on Phu Quoc in 1920, Cao Dai finally revealed himself to Chieu as the “Supreme Being of the Universe.” Thus it was that Duong-Dong chief town on Phu Quoc island became the birthplace of the new syncretic religion known as Caodaism.

Ngo Van Chieu was reportedly told to proclaim a new religion on earth. At a temple overlooking the Gulf of the Siam (Dinh-Cau) Chieu saw a vision of the sun half-rising from the sea, with the moon above that, the morning star above that, and at the zenith, a human eye surrounded by radiant beams.

The Divine Eye was henceforth to be the symbol of Caodaism and today the eye distinguishes most Cao Dai temples. There are those who say that use of this symbol was borrowed from Victor Hugo’s “eye of conscience” but whatever its origin, the use of an eye was considered appropriate because to represent the Cao Dai in human form would be “unsuitable for the universality of the new religion because each people has its vanity”.¹

In a spiritism session held at Quan Am Tu in February, 1921, Cao Dai the Old Immortal in his capacity as instructor invested or initiated Ngo Van Chieu as the founder of the new religion. “After three years of teaching, the Divine Master expressed His satisfaction with the spiritual progress achieved by the Disciple, and at the same time, expressed His decision to entrust him with a delicate mission: to establish the foundations of the new faith.”²

In his position as a government fonctionnaire, Chieu was reassigned to Saigon toward the end of summer in 1924. Shortly after his arrival he

¹ Holy See of Tay Ninh, *The Outline of Caodaism* (Mimeographed), p. 8.

² Pho – Thong Giao-Ly Cao-Dai-Giao Viet Nam, *Caodaism: A Historical and Doctorinal Glimpse* (Saigon: Nha in Hoa Chanh, October, 1966), p. 33.

inaugurated his apostolate by the initiation of several followers (the elect) into what would later become the Esoteric School of Caodaism. Other groups of spiritists in Saigon, hearing of Chieu's reputation, sought his counsel and guidance. Among these men was Le Van Trung, "an intelligent but dissolute merchant on the verge of total ruin."³ Trung was one of many Vietnamese businessmen and civil servants dabbling in occult at this time. Trung had reportedly been singled out by a spirit in a séance held in the Cho Gao section of Cho Lon (Chinese quarter of Saigon) and told to change his way of living and become a servant of God. About this time his path crossed with that of Ngo Van Chieu, a fateful meeting from the standpoint of the Cao Dai movement.

On Christmas Eve, 1925, Cao Dai revealed himself to Chieu and a group of occultist including Le Van Trung, saying: "Rejoice this night for it is the anniversary of my incarnation in Europe to teach the redemption of Man. I am greatly pleased to see you, my respectful disciples. My favor and blessings will be upon this house. The time is approaching when you will see many miracles and manifestations of my power which will awe and inspire you to greater love and respect in my regard. Await my orders."⁴ Chieu and these followers were instructed to "teach the Truth to the people of Vietnam."

Ngo Van Chieu and Le Van Trung were radically different men. Apparently Chieu was a real mystic, a scholarly and reserved man, who was unwilling to become involved in large-scale organization and proselytism. Trung on the other hand appears to have been a real organizer and "operator" and he became the leader of the Caodaist movement. According to Bernard Fall, Chieu retired and allowed Le Van Trung to assume leadership of the movement. Trung had been an impenitent materialist, but apparently his life was radically changed for he became a vegetarian and refused to indulge in other vices and pleasures such as opium smoking; he gave up his business to devote himself entirely to the new religion.

In April, 1926, Le Van Trung became the first Great Master of the Cao Dai religion.⁵ Another man, Pham Cong Tac, became the Ho Phap or "defender of the faith" or "spirit medium". Trung and Tac began the rapid expansion of the new religion by "adroitly putting well-known personalities in charge of local Cao Dai chapters regardless of length of membership or sex."⁶ One hundred or so bishoprics and archbishoprics were given out to

³ Bernard B. Fall, "The Political-Religious Sects of Viet-Nam," in *Pacific Affairs* (Summer, 1955), p. 237.

⁴ Tat Ninh, *The Outline of Caodaism*, p. 5.

⁵ Some sources name Trung as the first Pope of Caodaism but Caodaists maintain that he ranked as Quyen Giao Tong (interim Pope). The spiritual head of the church is said to be the spirit of Ly Tai Pe.

⁶ Fall, "Political-Religious Sects," p. 237.

adherents on the basis of how many followers they could muster. Soon Caodaism had several thousand followers with chapels and propaganda centers throughout the central part of Cochinchina. On October 7, 1926, Trung requested formal recognition of the new religion by the French Governor-General, presenting at that time a petition signed by 27 Cao Dai leaders and 247 adherents. The French government did not reply immediately in writing, but Trung was told personally that the French was reserving judgment until more extensive investigation of the faith could be conducted.⁷ The rapid growth of Caodaism in its early years was truly phenomenal. By the end of 1926, the Caodaists could count some 20,000 people as followers. In addition to simple peasants, the movement had a large and influential following among Vietnamese officials. This phenomenal growth has been attributed to several factors. One factor was the prevalence of secret societies within the movement. The Taoist Triad Society had long been active in Vietnam; an early name of the Cao Daist movement, the Heaven and Earth Society (Thien Dia Hoi), led some to conclude that Caodaism incorporated elements and followers from the Triad Society. When the Caodaist hierarchy was divided into three branches (corresponding to the Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist groupings), with different color robes and functions for each branch, Caodaism was bound to be compared with the Triad Society. One source indicated that Pham Cong Tac, the Ho Phap, controlled a blood brotherhood known as the Pham Mon which had several thousand followers and a great deal of influence in the area around Tay Ninh where the Holy See of Caodaism was finally organized in 1927.⁸ The Holy See of Caodaism was established at Long Thanh not far from the City of Tay Ninh on March 27, 1927. Here in the shadow of the sacred Black Virgin Mountain (Nui Ba Den), the Caodaists obtained a magnificent piece of land on which to build their "Vatican". A wealthy Frenchwoman, a Madame Monnier, is reported to have supplied the money and wielded the influence necessary to obtain title to the land from the French authorities. In was here that the greatest Cao Dai cathedral was built and dedicated on the anniversary of Victor Hugo's death, May 22, 1937. By that time, however, Caodaism had split into many different sects.

Centrifugal tendencies began to show themselves as early as 1928 when the Cau Kho was organized in Saigon. Though this movement is almost extinct now, its leaders claim that Cau Kho was actually the site of the Cao Dai movement before its move to Tay Ninh. Ngo Van Chieu left the

⁷ Ibid., p. 238.

⁸ Dennis J. Duncanson, *Government and Revolution in Vietnam* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 126.

leadership of the Cao Dai movement to Le Van Trung and Pham Cong Tac; soon after, he left the Holy See at Tay Ninh and returned to Can Tho where he spent the remainder of his life. Bernard Fall and Gerald Hickey claim that Chieu founded the sect known as the Chieu Minh Dan in Can Tho, but members of the sect dispute the use of the word “sect” as a misnomer. They claim that the Chieu Minh Dan is actually the Esoteric School of Caodaism, a continuation of the apostolate group founded by Chieu long before Caodaism was organized as a religion. Today this group is found in Can Tho, Saigon, and Cho Lon, and its claims continuity of its rituals and teaching by word of mouth directly from Ngo Van Chieu. It is without formal organization or evangelistic outreach; its thrust is highly intellectual and mystical and, in this writer’s opinion, this Esoteric School of Caodaism evidences a more advanced philosophical development than any of the Exoteric sects of Caodaism.

Following the exodus of Ngo Van Chieu and his followers, other groups began to break away from the Tay Ninh mother church. Around 1930 or 1931, Nguyen Van Ca felt called during a séance at Tay Ninh to found his own sect at Rach Gia on the Gulf of Siam called the Minh Chon Ly. This new sect departed radically from Caodaist teachings and was considered heretical if it was Caodaist at all. The headquarters was moved from Rach Gia to My Tho where the Holy See was built. The most striking departure the Minh Chon Ly made from Caodaist practice was to change the symbol from the Divine Eye to a divine eye within a large red heart. According to Gerald Hickey, Nguyen Van Ca chose this new symbol believing that “the eye simply records what is seen, the heart has full realization”.⁹ This also rejects many of the traditional Vietnamese beliefs and practices such as the Thien cult, the cult of Ong Tao, and the beliefs in numerous spirits, the ma, qui and than.¹⁰ The other sects of the Exoteric school do not force their adherents to give up much or any of their traditional beliefs; this is more in keeping with Caodaist belief that all religions contain some truth and are part of the Great Way. The Minh Chon Ly is considered heretical by the other Caodaist groups out it nevertheless has a large following and a powerful organizational hierarchy emanating from its My Tho headquarters. This sect does not adhere to the basic Caodaist dogma as written in three books which appeared in 1926; it does not follow the Rules of the Inviolable

⁹ Gerald C. Hickey, *Village in Vietnam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 293.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

Constitution or the New Rules, and its interpreters wrongly the spirit messages received by Ngo Van Chieu in the Selected Message.¹¹

Distressed by the departure of so many from Tay Ninh, Le Van Trung agreed to resign; some sources claim Trung was defrocked for the mismanagement of funds. Trung was replaced by Nguyen Ngoc Tuong. After several years of trying to reorganize and centralize the Caodaist movement, Tuong also stepped down giving leadership to a committee for a short period. With a group of disciples, Trung left Tay Ninh, settling in Ben Tre where he organized the Ban Chin Dao sect. By 1940, this sect had enough followers to set up a holy see on the outskirts of Ben Tre.

Leadership of the Tay Ninh sect to Pham Cong Tac when he was elected on November 12, 1935 by the Council of the Faithful and the Clerical Council. According to Fall, this election was widely disputed and led rival groups in My Tho and Ben Tre to set up their own “supreme leader of the Cao Dai”.

About this time, in 1934, Nguyen Huu Chin left Tay Ninh with a group of fourteen followers known as the Seven Saints and Seven Sages.¹² They founded yet another sect called the Tien Thien and soon controlled about seventy temples in the area around Ben Tre. They had no holy see until the end of the Indochina War when they began construction of a temple in coconut groves near the town of Soc Sai seventeen kilometers west of Ben Tre. Begun in 1954, the Tien Thien Holy See was completed in 1957.

This long period of dissension in the early 1930's was called the period of the schisms by most Caodaists because at one time, there were as many as twelve different sects. These included among others the Minh Chon Dao at Bac Lieu, the Bach Y Lien Doan in Tay Ninh province, and at least five others. There appears to have been little doctrinal difference between most of these sects with the exception, of course, of the Chieu Minh Dan (Esoteric School) and the Minh Chon Ly at My Tho. According to several French sources the division of the movement into sects was more a result of personal rather than doctrinal differences. According to Gerald Hickey, most Caodaists consider themselves Caodaist first and are not averse to attending ceremonies and rituals at the temples of other sects. Caodaists attempt to brush off the division of Caodaism into twelve sects as an insignificant factor saying that the twelve sects are similar to the twelve Disciples of Christ – a rather bizarre comparison to say the least.

¹¹ Private interview held in Saigon with Tran, Thai Chan (alias Dong Tan) a leading Caodaist historian. Chan is a member of the Caodaist church of central Vietnam and the head of the CAodaist Cultural Association.

¹² Hickey, “Village in Vietnam”, p. 293

One possible reason for the splintering off of so many different sects is that the Holy See in Tay Ninh became deeply involved in politics and the accumulation of temporal wealth... This was particularly true under Pham Cong Tac, the politically ambitious Ho Phap. “”Quarrels developed over the questions of power and the Ho Phap’s right to form an army as well, and dissension ensued because individual leaders acquired followers, splitting off from the Tam Ky Tay Ninh sect. The result was an exodus from Tay Ninh ... ”¹³ Initially at least, the French viewed the Tay Ninh sect favorably and the Holy See was allowed to collect taxes in a large area surrounding the Holy See.

Perhaps Ngo Van Chieu was fortunate in that he did not live to see the complete breakup and degeneration of his vision. After retiring to Can Tho, he lived out his life in peace and contemplation. Members of the Esoteric School who knew him claim that he was deeply disturbed by the rapid and unchecked growth of Caodaism into a large unwieldy organization with a huge mass of followers, fantastic temporal wealth, an army, and politically and ambitious leaders. When he died in 1932, Chieu had spent more than a week in deep meditation in a simple straw shelter.

Collaboration with the Japanese

Some Caodaist leaders came to believe that their religion should be the state religion of Vietnam; they saw it as a natural continuity and following of the Confucian tradition. This led in turn to monarchist tendencies which began to manifest themselves in the late 1930’s. Several Vietnamese nationalist groups had looked in the 1906 (after the Russo-Japanese War) for aid and inspiration in the struggle against the French. Prince Cuong De, a member of the Vietnamese royal family, fled to Japan that year with Pham Boi Chau, leader of the pro-Japanese Viet-Nam Quang Phuc Hoi (Vietnam Restoration League). This group sought to restore the monarchy, expecting it to take a leading role in modernizing Vietnam the way the Japanese emperors had done after the Meiji Restoration.

The rise of the Japanese sun in the Far East resulted in a new nationalism in Vietnam which manifested itself among Caodist leaders in particular. In his book, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, Joseph Buttinger points out that undercover agents of Japan had made contact with the Caodaists in Cochinchina in the mid-1930’s and the Japanese legation in

¹³ Ibid., p. 292.

Saigon served as a go-between for Caodaist groups to maintain contact with the Vietnamese nationalists surrounding Prince Cuong De in Japan.

As the Japanese came closer and closer to the borders on Indochina, and after France fell before the Nazi onslaught in the form of spirit messages predicted the return of Prince Cuong De from Japan and foresaw the eventual defeat of the French colonialists. But the Caodaists acted too soon. The suspicious French unleashed their ferocious security police on the sects before the Japanese were in a position to guarantee their safety. The Tien Thien sect around Ben Tre was the first to feel the ire of the French. Various leaders were thoroughly investigated and several were exiled or imprisoned on Poulo Condor or Phu Quoc islands. Even after the Japanese army officially occupied Indochina, the French police continued their activities against Caodaism. Having decided to leave the French Vichy collaborationists in control of the country, the Japanese were reluctant to alienate the French by talking too active a role in fomenting nationalist movements. Therefore, until the Japanese Kempeitai (secret police) became active in Conchinchina in late 1941, the Caodaist sects were under constant harassment from the French surete.

The Japanese Kempetai finally arrived in Conchinchina in December, 1941 (according to Joseph Buttinger) and in its ranks were several of the men who had been active undercover agents in Indochina before the war. The Vichy regime of Admiral Decoux had already acted, however, and the Kempetai was too late to prevent the exile of the Ho Phap of Tay Ninh, in August, 1941, the Ho Phap would remain in exile until the end of World War II.

The Japanese acted swiftly to recoup their losses. In 1943, the Kempetai Tran Quang Vinh, a rival of Pham Cong Tac, and persuaded him to return from Cambodia and organize the Tay Ninh sect. With Japanese protection and financial and military aid, Vinh was soon building the Holy See into a virtual fiefdom with its own army and administration. The Japanese helped Vinh train Caodaist paramilitary forces called the "White Caps" and the "Volunteer Interior Forces".¹⁴

As the end of the war approached, it became apparent to the French collaborationists in Indochina that the Japanese were losing. The uneasy colonialists, like the chameleons they were, began to look and act like Free French as each day passed. The Japanese reacted in March, 1945, with a coup d'etat which resulted in the internment of all Frenchmen including the security police. Caodaist troops participated in the coup d'etat and split the

¹⁴ Fall, "Political-Religious Sects," p. 239.

political spoils, taking de facto control of large sections of the Cochinchinese country-side.

The Japanese surrender in August, 1945, resulted in the declaration of independence by Ho Chi Minh's Viet Nam and the setting-up of a Vietnamese regime. In the South, however, the Caodaists, allied with the Hoa Hao (another religious sect), found themselves in a position to seize power. They came close to "gaining preponderance over all other groups (including the Viet Minh) operating in the South. However, in the absence of the Ho Phap, still imprisoned and failed to exploit the situation."¹⁵

The victorious Viet Minh posed as the party favoured by the Allies; they had worked closely with the American OSS troops during the war and so could make such a claim. They exploited their psychological advantage to gain the cooperation of the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects in presenting some sort of united front to the British who had been designated by the Potsdam Agreements to occupy southern Vietnam to maintain order and receive the Japanese surrender. The détente achieved between the Viet Minh and the sects was short-lived, however. The Communist leaders in the South were too doctrinaire to unify and consolidate the nationalist group there. The Caodaists and the Hoa Hao in turn were too powerful in their secure territorial enclave to become the passive participant in the united front with the Viet Minh. Nguyen Binh, the Communist cadre appointed to head the committee of the South by the Hanoi government, could brook no competition; therefore, he tried to fight the returning French on one hand and to subdue the sects on the other. The result was a series of clashes and massacres which eventually drove the Caodaists and the Hoa Hao to collaboration with the French. "Particularly offensive was the massacre of 2,791 Cao Dai priests and followers by the Communist Viet-Minh in Quang Ngai in August, 1945."¹⁶

The process by which the Caodaists came to collaborate with the French during the French Indochina war was a result of the mistake made by the Communist leaders in the South and the political pragmatism practiced by the Cao Dai leaders. Tran Quang Vinh, the commander of the Cao Dai armed forces during the confused post-war period, was captured by the French on Dai forces, Vinh was able to secure the release and return of Pham Cong Tac and his aids from Madagascar. French General Latour announced dramatically that the Caodaists had "rallied to the national cause." The French High Command in Indochina signed a military

¹⁵ Fall, "Political-Religious Sects," p. 239.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, "Religions of Vietnam," (MACV: Saigon, 1966), Mimeographed, p. 50.

convention with the Caodaists on January 8, 1947; the Caodaists promised “loyal collaboration” with the French.¹⁷

The rallying of both the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects to the French was the key to understanding the Indochina War in the South. The powerful sects controlled large areas in the Mekong Delta which separated Communist bases from each other. The Viet Minh were thus unable to consolidate their hold on in this regard, is difficult to understand. At the end World War II, the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects constituted the most powerful force in the South and could have contributed to a Viet Minh victory had the Viet Minh leaders been willing to allow them some increment of power within the front. “The Viet-Minh’s unwillingness to compromise and its outright stupidity in dealing harshly with the sects at a time when it needed every ally it could get threw the sects into the arms of French and gave the latter control over wide areas of South Viet-Nam which they could never have hoped to conquer militarily.”¹⁸

With the exception of the Tay Ninh sect, the Cao Dai sects remained clandestine until the end of the war. They Viet Minh did succeed in subverting some of the minor sects, but on the whole, their clumsy efforts to capture the Caodaists backfired badly. The Tay Ninh sect under Pham Cong Tac, having decided to throw its support behind the French, was able to function openly. Trinh Minh The, a member of the Tay Ninh sect and a military leader, took to the hills in 1951 where he fought both the French and the Viet Minh. His ultra-nationalist leanings led him into a sort of loyal opposition to Pham Cong Tac until the end of the Indochina War and the rise of Ngo Dinh Diem.

Having made their peace with the French, Pham Cong Tac and the Tay Ninh sect spent the rest of the war consolidating political strength by seeking to make the nationalist government created by the French dependent upon the Caodaists for support. When the Bao Dai regime was granted independence under the Elysee Agreements of 1949, Tay Ninh was able to wield considerable influence by throwing its support to Bao Dai’s second premier, Tran Van Huu. As the war dragged on and the French position deteriorated, the Caodaists with their political organization were able to take advantage of the government’s need for a strong nationalist ally. At first the French were cautious about granting too much power to Pham Cong Tac, but after a Viet Minh attack on Tay Ninh in which the Caodaists refused to fight, the French capitulated agreeing to train and organize additional Cao Dai troops. Le Van Hoach, an aide of Pham Cong Tac, and other Caodaists soon

¹⁷ Fall, “Political-Religious Sects,” p. 240.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 247.

held important positions in the government's cabinet, Hoach becoming "Chief Minister" in Saigon.

According to Bernard Fall, the sect armies were not effective on a national scale, but they did act as a valuable home guard in the areas which they controlled. This in turn relieved the French of the responsibility for defending large areas of the Mekong Delta. Oftentimes, the smaller Cao Dai and Hoa Hao units did not rise much above banditry; their contribution to the war was essentially negative. The Viet Minh were not defeated but were prevented from consolidating control over the strategic Mekong Delta. The coordination of Cao Dai military activities was handled by a French staff section, the Inspectorat General des Forces Suppletives, which aid an allowance to unit commanders on a per capita basis of actual fighting men available.¹⁹

Pham Cong Tac and the Tay Ninh leadership began to steer and increasingly nationalist course as the French defeat became more and more imminent. The Ho Phap called a number of press conference in late 1953 and 1954 in which his political pragmatism was immediately apparent. At the same time he would praise both Bao Dai and Ho Chi Minh calling for national union; close cooperation with the French also continued. Bao Dai was frantically trying to build some sort of coalition which would swing all nationalist support behind him. When this failed, he was able to wring a promise of full military cooperation from the Caodaist Commander-in-Chief in the struggle against the Communists. The disaster at Dien Bien Phu led the Ho Phap to change course once more. Tac praised both Bao Dai and Ho as liberators of the Vietnamese people while calling for a reconciliation between the Nationalists and the Communists.

For a time after the Geneva settlements and the emergence of Premier Ngo Dinh Diem, the Caodaists were able to maintain their amazing balancing act. Ngo Dinh Diem considered the Caodaists and the Hoa Hao a threat to his power; the Communists had seen the threat too. Faced with the armies of the Binh Xuyen, an organization of racketeers that controlled the Saigon police and all vice and gambling in the capital, Diem decided to move against their allies, the sects, as well. Diem was up against impossible odds, but he proved both ruthless and pragmatic. Arch-nationalist and Caodaist rebel, Trinh Minh The, rallied to Diem in February, 1955, reportedly for the sum of two million dollars in bribes. On March 31, 1955, General Nguyen Thanh Phuong, Commander-in-Chief of the Caodaist

¹⁹ Fall, "Political-Religious Sects," p. 241.

troops, also joined Diem's camp integrating most of his troops into the national Territory Controlled by the Cao Dai (April – June 1955)²⁰ army.

Pham Cong Tac, politically ambitious man that he was, chose to continue supporting the Hoa Hao and the Binh Xuyen. When fighting broke out in Saigon, he was able, nevertheless, to avoid a military confrontation between the Caodaists at Tay Ninh and Diem's national army. When Diem defeated the Binh Xuyen and neutralized the attempt of General Nguyen Van Hinh to return Bao Dai to power, it was but a matter of time until he moved against the Ho Phap and Tay Ninh. In October, 1955 Pham Cong Tac was stripped of all his temporal powers when Caodaist troops under General Phuong moved against him in a bloodless coup. Three hundred of his papal guardsmen were disarmed and Tac became a virtual prisoner of his own troops. The Caodaist arm was disbanded by integrating it into the national army structure. On February 19, 1956, Tay Ninh was officially occupied by government troops and Pham Cong Tac was reported missing. Soon after, he turned up in Cambodia where he spent his remaining years.

Ngo Dinh Diem's rise to power forced the Caodaist to restrict their political activities. The Tay Ninh sect was denied its right to field an army or even collect taxes around the Holy See. Following the final departure of the French, the other Cao Dai sects emerged once more. Various Cao Dai leaders imprisoned by the French were released. Nguyen Buu Tai took leadership in the Tien Thien sect and for the first time organized the decentralized hierarchy around a holy see built at Soc Sai and completed in 1957. The Minh Chon Ly sect at My Tho had to rebuild its holy see which had been destroyed in the course of a battle between the French and the Viet Minh.

Following the coup d'état which overthrew the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963, several of the Caodaist sects began once more to play a political role. According to Dennis Duncanson, several prominent Caodaists joined the Buddhist Inter-sect Committee founded during the 1963 Buddhist crisis when Diem unleashed the military on the rebellious Buddhists. Since the coup, subsequent regimes have attempted to placate and even gain the support of the Caodaists. At the present time, the Thieu regime apparently enjoys the backing of most Cao Dai sects. A small Caodaist bloc in the National Assembly recognized the reality of Caodaism's numerical size and power. Caodaists are still present in large numbers in the Mekong Delta and the location of the Holy See at Tay Ninh is particularly important because of

²⁰ U.S. Department of the Army, "The Cao Dai," in *Minority Groups in the Republic of Vietnam*, Pamphlet No. 550-105 (1966). P. 826

its proximity to Saigon and the Communist supply bases just over the Cambodian border.

It has been said that many Caodaists have been motivated by the thought of making Caodaism the national religion of Vietnam. Seeing that Caodaism is really a compilation of the myriad religious influences which have touched Vietnam in the course of centuries, this would seem logical from the Caodaist point of view. Tran Quang Vinh, one of the early Cao Dai military leaders once said that the administrative structure of the religion “is that of a modern state ... It does not lack ambitions, which, however, remain within the realm of possibility: to make Caodaism into a religion of the State, into the national religion of Viet Nam ... ”²¹

Many of Caodaism’s leaders have never reconciled themselves to playing a temporal and political role; this is especially true of the members of the Esoteric School of Caodaism. Political involvement and temporal wealth have always been a divisive factor in the Cao Dai movement and were no doubt a factor in the period of schisms during the early 1930’s. However, Caodaism is far more than a political movement; the activities of certain individuals and military leaders whose political ambitions were greater than their religious dedication must not be thought of as representative of the entire Cao Dai movement. If one were to judge all Christendom on the basis of a few corrupt medieval popes, one would indeed have a warped view of Christianity. Likewise with Caodaism.

II. CAODAIISM AS PHILOSOPHY

“We do not believe that there is only one truth and one uniquely sanctifying belief. The creator has scattered the seeds of Truth over the centuries and over the continents of the early. Jesus or Buddha or Lao-tzu, their message is at bottom only a form of the great divine truth. In their depths all religions come together. ” – Ngo Minh Chieu

Eclecticism: A way of looking at Things

There is nothing new in Caodaism. Such a statement could lead some to criticize Caodaism for a lack of originality or philosophical depth but Caodaists would maintain that this is a basic strength of their religion. Caodaism makes no claim to being the only way to salvation. Rather, it

²¹ Fall, “Political-Religious Sects,” quoting Vinh, p. 239.

recognizes the truths in all religions and includes them in its teachings. Because of this fact, detractors of Caodaism have called it a “salad religion”. It is an intermingling of all the various religious and philosophical influences that have reached the shores of Vietnam down through the centuries. Vietnam itself is a synthesis of races, religions, and cultures. The most enduring influence has been that of the Chinese, but Indian and Western thought have also left their mark on Vietnam. A Vietnamese cannot properly be labeled a Buddhist, Confucianist, or even a Christian, for whatever his religious profession, each individual may evidence in one form or another some other influence. As a synthesis of many religions, Caodaism is truly a Vietnamese phenomenon. There is nothing new in Caodaism except that it is uniquely Vietnamese. It is a way of looking at things, of harmonizing all the conflicting demands made upon the individual.

All previous religions have proposed some form of salvation for mankind. Confucianism, the worship of the Genii, Christianity, Taoism, Buddhism, and Mohammedanism are all parts of the Great Way – Dai Dao. They germinated in widely separated parts of the world and were adapted to the characteristics and mores of the various peoples and cultures. Because God initially used human agents to found these religions, each one in turn became ethnocentric; that is, human or racial vanity warped and changed the original message. Thus, the world’s great religions failed to converge into a universal religion because of primitive communications and religious chauvinism. Religion became a divisive rather than a uniting factor in the world. A new and different revelation of God was needed; Cao Dai Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do is the new universal religion – “The Great Way opened by the Cao Dai in view of the third Amnesty of God.”

As a universal religion, Caodaism recognizes all the truths in other religions and adapts them while excluding their separatist or chauvinistic tendencies. This is what Caodaists call “conciliating eclecticism.” Caodaism adopts “for its doctrinal fund”: 1) “the norms of Confucian reigorism, 2) the gentleness of Buddhist and its metaphysic speculations, 3) the code of ethics of Taoism and its esoteric conceptions, and 4) the noble morals of Christianity.”²²

Caodaist architecture and statuary provides further examples of eclecticism. Above the doorway of the Great Divine Temple in Tay Ninh appears statuary “showing Lao Tze carrying Jesus Christ on his shoulders; in turn, Christ supports Confucius and Buddha ... The ‘saintly’ hierarchy or ‘spiritual fathers’ of Caodaism are depicted inside the cathedral: the three great saints, Confucius, Buddha, Lao Tze; Christ, ranked below these since

²² Caodaism: Historical and Doctrinal Glimpse, p. 31.

he appeared at a later date; the high category of saints, including all those of Theravade and Mahayana Buddhism; and finally Sun Yat Sen, Joan of Arc, Victor Hugo, St. Bernard, St. John the Baptist, and the French admiral Duclos.”²³ The cathedral itself makes use of the twin towers characteristic of European cathedrals, spherical domes reminiscent on the Islamic mosque, and a decorative style with strong Buddhist influence.

Caodaism sees itself as a natural continuity of the Vietnamese Confucian tradition. The elementary forces of nature are, of course, Yin and Yang, as set forth in the Book of Changes. Caodaists must perform their duties towards society by faithfully fulfilling their role within the family, the village, the nation, and that larger extended family, the world. Among the Confucian teachings which are accepted are the three fundamental relationships: ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife. The Five Cardinal Virtues, benevolence, righteousness, propriety, knowledge, and sincerity are also accepted as guidelines for individual behavior. Women are to adhere to four virtues – proper employment, proper demeanor, proper speech, and proper behavior.

Taoism manifests itself more strongly in the Esoteric School of Caodaism than its Exoteric counterpart. The Doctrine of Silence and Inaction is the basis for the Esoteric School – asceticism is practiced to a greater extent though not extreme asceticism. Caodaists are aware that Taoism degenerated to superstitious occultism in China; they consider this deplorable. Asceticism as practiced by members of the Esoteric School consists of permanent vegetarianism and the restraint of human passion in the practice of daily contemplation. Simplicity of life and meditation on the Dao are encouraged and lead to lucidity – clarity of mind and tranquility.

Buddhist philosophy is a fundamental aspect of Caodaism. Samsara, the wheel of birth and death, and the law of karma are accepted by Caodaists. Men’s suffering in this world is seen to be a consequence on his depraved mind; he sees himself as a distinct self. The path of escape from suffering comes as a result of discipline and meditation; the goal is nirvana or eternal life. Echoing an earlier Indian tradition, the Caodaists see nirvana as man’s realization that his soul is one with the soul or the universe or Brahman. As defined by a Caodaist, nirvana is an invisible life where the soul attains divine happiness; it need not be reincarnate. According to several sources, nirvana is generally realized following death; some men like Ngo Van Chieu are said to have attained nirvana while still alive. The Exoteric and Esoteric Schools of Caodaism have been compared to the

²³ U.S. Army, *Minority Groups in Vietnam*, p. 832.

Theravada and Mahayana branches of Buddhism – a comparison which is denied by one Cao Dai publication.

Though Caodaist philosophy recognizes the validity of Christianity as a religion and Jesus Christ as one of its saints. Christian doctrines and beliefs are not very evident though the religion does claim to incorporate Christian altruism and “noble morals”. The organization of the Tay Ninh sect and to a lesser extent, the other sects, is remarkably similar to the hierarchy of the Vatican. Caodaist architecture with its similarity to European cathedrals is yet another evidence of Western influence.

In its final form, Caodaism claims to be the synthesis of all religions. Caodaists deny that it is either cosmic or acesmic; it is neither for it contains important elements to harmonize the otherworldliness of the Indian tradition with the worldliness of the Chinese. Man can at one time be out of this world and an integral part of this world.

“The Eye is the master of the soul
And the chief of the tow elements
Element is Spirit
Spirit is God
And God is I”

As a way of looking at things, Caodaism wreaks havoc in our orderly world of definitions and fine philosophical distinctions; Caodaism accepts them all and denies them all; all things are one.

The Cao Dai View of History: The Three Amnesties of God

To lend credence to their philosophical framework, Caodaists have developed a historical view. History is divided into three epochs or cycles of history.

The cycle of creation was characterized by Man living in a state of primitive goodness in perfect harmony with nature. A creature of God, Man was a vegetarian at peace with himself and his fellow creatures – there was no struggle or killing. There was only one religion which was patterned on the Rgveda. There was only one god who was father of all but called by many names.

Towards the end of the first cycle, Man falls victim to his low desires which seduce him and rob him of the purity and joy of his earlier state. Man is influenced by “wicked material desires which made him stupid and dark.” The contact of his sensory organs with the outside world enslaved him to the

earth making it more and more difficult for his soul to realize any longer its oneness with the Monad – the Soul of the Universe. Seduced by material desires Man's soul cannot return to its source of origin. The natural progression for Man's soul is downward, but he constantly searches for a means of escaping the desires and the awful torment of karma they accrue. He wishes to regain the eternal life of his primordial creation. Gradually the low desires day after day, month after month, year after year until the world becomes mad, disorderly, and very dangerous. Man lacks moderation in fulfilling his bodily needs tending always towards excess. A false concept of a distinct self creates in Man the desire for wealth, comfort, sex, and other carnal enjoyments. Not that these things are inherently evil but that with regard to them Man loses his sense of perspective failing to perceive the higher purpose for his life.

At the end of the first epoch, Man has sunk so low and the world is so full of suffering that God institutes the first amnesty of God, the first revelation of Himself to Man. Because the earth was still relatively primitive and there were long distances between the civilized areas of the world, the first amnesty of God was manifested in different ways in different parts of the world. In the West, Moses became the saint who led the people to salvation. Nhien-Dang Co-Phat appeared as the first revelation of Buddhism before Sakyamuni; Thai-Thuong Dao-Quan, for Taoism, Emperor Phuc Hi, for Confucianism. This first amnesty of God failed after a short time, however, and the cycle of history, the cycle of struggle, ensued.

The first amnesty of God failed to transform Man and the world once more degenerated into suffering and violence. God revealed himself in the second amnesty through Jesus Christ and Mohammed in the west, Sakyamuni, Lao Tze, and Confucius in the East. The Truth was found in the teachings of these men, but after the deaths of the various founders, the original messages were gradually changed because there was no one left to guide men on earth. Christianity became dogmatic as did all the other great religions; each religion sank itself in a dogmatism which claimed that it was the sole of salvation.

In these first two epochs of history, the peoples of the world did not know each other and lacked the means of transport and communication. God reveals himself in human form and each religion was peculiarly suited to the customs and races of each part of the world. All these religions were branches of the Great Way – they had the means to salvation, but human weakness altered the true message and religion became a dividing rather than a uniting factor.

Following the second amnesty of God, the third epoch of history renewed the cycle of violence and destruction. The Third Amnesty of God was Caodaism. Known as the Cao Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do (the Great Way opened by the Cao Dai in view of the Third Amnesty of God), this third or crowning revelation of God was given on Phu Quoc island to Ngo Van Chieu in 1920. (This is the official name of Caodaism and does not refer to the Tay Ninh sect alone.) According to Caodaists, God revealed himself to Man in human form because Man was not yet sufficiently advanced to receive God's teachings directly. In the Third Amnesty of God:

Instead of coming as formerly in human shape, God manifested Himself through Spiritualism to teach His doctrine. He will not grant any mortal the privilege of founding the new religion for a human being still belongs to a nation or race. The new manifestation of God so comes, because all religions submitted to a human founder's authority are unsuited to universality, seeing that His prophets protested against the truths proclaimed by other religious faiths towards which they show a marked intolerance.²⁴

The Nature of the Cao Dai

Cao Dai means "High Palace" and according to one Vietnamese source, Cao Dai is referred to in several ancient Buddhist prayers. In the Third Amnesty of God, Cao Dai is the name of the supreme being of the universe – the Monad. In the 1920 séance held on Phu Quoc, Ngo Van Chieu was given the name of the spirit he was communicating with – Cao Dai the Old Immortal. However, Caodaists feel no compunction about calling the supreme being by most any name commonly used to refer to God. Cao Dai is called the Infinite, the Absolute, the Dao (the Way), or the Ultimate Good. More traditional names such as Ngoc Hoang Thuong De (Emperor of Jade God), Nam Phuong Giao Chu (Spiritual Master of the South), Dai Bo-Tat (the Eldest Boddhisattva), and Ma-Ha-Tat (the Venerable Saint) are also commonly used.²⁵ Nomenclature seems to make little difference to the Caodaists perhaps because the supreme being is ultimately nameless.

Cao Dai is the creator of all things, supreme father of all, eternal, without beginning or end. He is a unique master who creates all angels, buddhas and saints. He is an invisible but real being, not necessarily a person

²⁴ Tay Ninh, *The Outline of Caodaism*, p. 7.

²⁵ *Caodaism: Historical and Doctrinal Glimpse*, p. 30.

and not necessarily a force. Since the Third Amnesty of God, He communicates with Man through spiritual mediums; He is thus able to guide continually the development of His Dao.

Man can perceive and recognize Cao Dai directly and easily if he can perceive and recognize his own soul, the invisible but real being that masters his body. The Cao Dai is similar to the soul of Man, for Man's soul has its origin in the soul of the Universe – Man's soul is an integral part of the universal soul. Caodaism preaches the fusion or identification of Man's soul with the universal soul. Man's soul and the Soul of the Universe are ONE. "My Dao is You, and You are I." (Tat Tvam Asi)

Man's Place in the Scheme of the Universe

The forces of Yin and Yang, so pervasive throughout Chinese philosophy, are also essential to Caodaist philosophy. Created by God or the Monad, these forces were used to create Man and the World. Within Cao Dai temples, women (Yin – Nu) are always to the right of the Divine Eye and the Man (Yang – Nam) to the left. Man is a synthesis of two extreme parts of the Universe: One is the smallest atom and the other, the widest solar system. Man's soul is a natural alteration of the Universe; he possesses an immortal soul which passes through a natural cycle of life and death.

Man's soul inhabits an occult world dominated by three categories of invisible beings: a) the highest deities composed of buddhas, saints and angels; b) the medium beings which include sanctified spirits and great benefactors of mankind; c) the lower beings which include both phantoms and devils.²⁶ All three orders of beings must pass through human existence in order to help humanity and normally move from the lowest towards the highest forms. Of all living creatures, man alone has the capability to become either a devil or an angel. Man has a unique soul and his position is determined by the effects of his deeds, by the law of karma.

The human soul may go up or go down the ladder of existence, the direction being determined by Man's will and action. Caodaists believe that Man is constituted by three elements:

1) The Tinh is the essence of all matter, the cosmic sperm; no light can be manifested without it. The Tinh is the germinative virtue of animal and plant life, sexual energy. The Tinh resides in Man and through evaporation becomes the coarse part of the perispirit.

²⁶ Religions of Vietnam, p. 47.

2) The Khi (literally means breath, air) is Man's vital energy, his health and strength. Contained within the perispirit, the Khi is the agent which unites the soul with the physical body it vivifies.

3) The Than or Man's intelligence is actually divided into two levels in Man. The Superior Mental is the Divine essence within Man; the Inferior Mental is the most subtle of the perispirit.²⁷ Constituted as he is, Man must seek to elevate or purify his soul by converting his sexual energy first into vital energy, and finally, into mental energy. By this means, the development of the Superior Mental or his divine essence, Man can escape the endless wheel of birth and death by identifying his soul with that of the Universe.

III. CAODAIISM AS RELIGION

At the Center: Spiritualism

Spiritualism is at the center of Caodaist belief and practice. On the philosophical plane, this means that all reality is in essence spiritual. This spiritualism as practiced by the Caodaists includes communication with the dead as well as with the higher spirits of the occult world. Vietnamese who convert to Caodaism are allowed to retain the animist and ancestor worship facets of the Vietnamese tradition. "The worship of ancestors is a means of communication between the visible and invisible worlds; between the living and the dead; and forms a means of expressing love, gratitude and affection for the ancestors."²⁸ One Caodaist was adamant in asserting that Caodaist does not allow its followers to petition the dead ancestors and spirits for good luck or benevolence; according to him, Caodaist ancestor worship consists of giving the dead their just veneration.

Ngo Van Chieu, the founder of Caodaism is said to have read a great deal about Taoist mediumship and according to Dennis Duncanson, Chieu was also acquainted with European spiritualistic methods as employed by Colonel Olcott and the Theosophists. Chieu developed or had revealed to him some unique spiritualistic methods. Divine teaching was received by means of "Ngoc Co" – "a special kind of psychographic receptor unknown to Western Occultism, but used in the Orient ... to communicate with the spiritual worlds."²⁹ Members of the Esoteric School maintain that Chieu was

²⁷ Tay Ninh, The Outline of Caodaism, p. 16.

²⁸ Religions of Vietnam, p. 48.

²⁹ Caodaism: A Historical and Doctrinal Glimpse, p. 30.

not himself a spirit, but he made use of adolescence mediums between twelve and fifteen years of age.

In the beginning, spirit messages were received by means of a tipping table, an “Ouija-board” type of device. This table had written on it the letters of the Vietnamese alphabet. The medium, under the influence of the spirit, spelled out the divine message by pointing to letters on the board. Reportedly, the first message received from the Cao Dai were signed with the first three vowels of the Vietnamese alphabet – A A A – prior to the revelation that he was the supreme being of the Universe.

The tipping table was used to receive message until Cao Dai led by Chieu to make use of the beaked bag – the corbeille a bec. This device is made by attaching a slender stick of wood to part of a dried gourd. The medium or mediums hold the beaked bag with their hands under their gourd while the spirit guides their hands in writing the divine message. A beaked projection on the end of the stick draws the message on a table. The message is recorded in writing by two observers who then read back the message to the medium to ensure that no errors have been made by copying the message.

The central doctrine of Caodaism is that in the Third Amnesty of God, Cao Dai reveals Himself through spiritualism rather than through physical incarnation in a man. Thus, the revelation of God is not limited to the life-span of a single man; Cao Dai guides Man continually by revealing Himself through mediums. It is impossible for Man to change or warp the meaning of His teaching through varying interpretations. God is not restricted to any particular race by physical appearance; symbolized by the Divine Eye, Cao Dai attains the highest universality. The Third Amnesty of God is the crowning revelation which will save Man.

Apparently Caodaism does not really need a Bible or scripture because Cao Dai is able to guide man continuously. Nevertheless, there is a body of literature or scriptures which regulates and instructs Caodaists. Compiled from many spirit messages, these books set down doctrinal and organizational guidelines. Selected Messages is a book compiled from spirit messages received by Ngo Van Chiêu. The Rules of the Inviolable Constitution and the New Rules are spirit messages received by Pham Cong Tac and they dictate the organizational and doctrinal framework of Caodaism. These three publications appeared in 1926.³⁰ It is on the basis of its non-adherence to these rules and its wrong interpretation of the Messages that the Minh Chon Ly sect at My Tho is considered heretical by the other sects.

³⁰ Interview held with Thai Chan Tran, Saigon, Jan., 1970.

The way in which the beaked bad is used for spirit messages seems to vary. Adolescent mediums are not always used and the Esoteric School makes use of two mediums both of whom hold the bag. Great effort is made to ensure the authenticity of the messages through the use of the two recorders to reread the message while the spirit is still possessing the medium. There are claims that only one official beaked-bad and that for spirit messages to be accepted as valid the séance must take place in the Tay Ninh temple. This seems to be true only for the Tay Ninh sect; other groups seem to have their own mediums and beaked bags.

Attending a Cao Dai séance in the dead of night is a fascinating and awesome experience (the author attended such a séance held at the Cao Kho temple on Nguyễn Cửu Trinh street in Saigon on Christmas Eve, December 24, 1970).

At the stroke of midnight, after a simple vegetarian meal, the faithful quietly made their way into the main sanctuary of the temple. Gone were the brightly-colored robes of the earlier ceremony – everyone was now in white, the color of purity. All the men wore their traditional Vietnamese dress with black turbans. Arrayed before the altar were three tables. Two large tables were on either side of the altar; these for the recorders; in the middle immediately before the altar was a small table upon which rested the beaked bag. The medium, a thin, middle-aged man, made his way to the small table where he sat himself before the beaked bag. All the adepts were now kneeling before the altar, the women, to its right and the men, to its left. At the sound of the gong, the kowtowing began with two young men attending the incense at the altars. Then an elderly leader began the rites for ceremonial purification. Taking a glass containing a clear and water mixture, he dipped a flower into it and symbolically sprinkled the four corners of the temple. During the séance he would keep the table moistened with the purifying liquid.

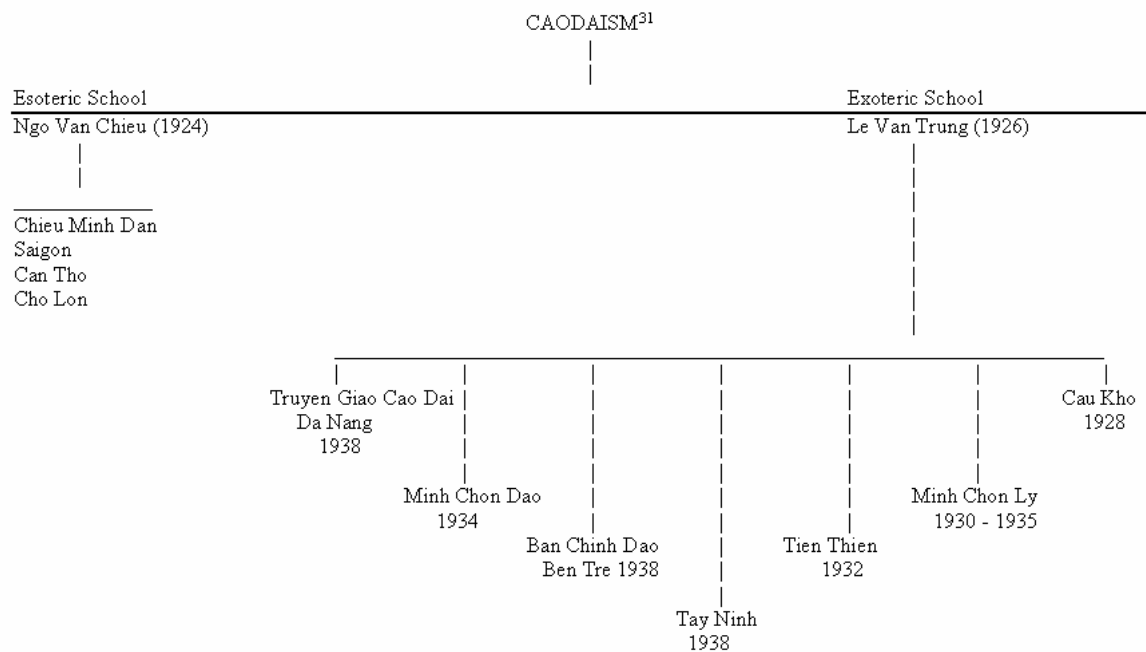
With the preliminaries out of the way, the séance began. An eerie chant rose from the throats of the faithful and the medium grasped the beaked bag, waving it gently to and fro. As the chant crescendoed, the medium became curiously rigid now waving the beaked bag in large circular motions. Then the beak descended towards the table; a hush fell across the worshippers; the spirit message began. As the spirit guided his hands in drawing the Chinese characters, the medium intoned the message in poetic chant. The recorders were busily at work taking down each word. When the medium would signal an end to part of the communication, one of the recorders would stand a chant from the written text he had taken down. If he faltered or made a mistake, the medium would correct him. Then, the

chanting would resume until once more the beaked descended to the table. The message this evening came from Jesus Christ – he greeted his Cao Dai followers on the anniversary of his birth.

Most of the participants in the ceremony, especially the medium, evidenced a trance-like state which seemed to make them oblivious of passing hours and the pain from unrelieved kneeling. As the séance continued, one of the recorders grew tired and quietly motioned for another to take his place. The séance wore on into the early morning hours; outside there was only the deathly silence of Saigon during curfew.

The Two Schools of Caodaism

Caodaism is divided into two branches known as the Esoteric and the Exoteric Schools respectively. There are marked doctrinal and organizational differences in the two schools, yet Caodaists maintain that the two schools harmonize into a complete whole.



Members of the Esoteric School claim that the Exoteric School (Ngoai Giao Cong-Truyền) represents the first cycle of spiritual evolution which the Esoteric School (Noi Giao Tam Truyền) represents the final cycle. One Caodaist drew a comparison of the Exoteric School with elementary or high school, the Esoteric School being like university.

The contrast between the two schools is truly remarkable. The Esoteric School is the oldest of the two having been founded by Ngo Van Chiêu as an apostolate. “This school is exclusively reserved to the elect – those who are personally selected by the Divine Master in the calm and silence of the sanctuary and its teaching has no temple, no priesthood, no liturgy, no material organization.”³¹ The Exoteric School, on the other hand, is an organization for propagation and evangelization. “It appeals to the great public without special preparation with its imposing temples, its priesthood based on a hierarchical system, its liturgical pomp, and administrative organization patterned partially on secular formulae.”³² The Exoteric School initiates and guides the religious development of neophytes and participates in the social life of its adherents.

Disciples of the Esoteric School are bound by irrevocable vows which force them to renounce all honors, wealth, and all enjoyments of the worldly life. There is no hierarchy or priesthood just older and younger adepts or brothers. No matter what fortune they have accumulated or social rank, attained, Esoteric disciples must adapt to rigorous and simple living conditions imposed by religious discipline. No peculiar appearance such as shaved head or monk’s robes are necessary. Using secret methods revealed to Ngo Van Chiêu, and passed on by word of mouth within the Apostolate. The disciple trains himself in lucid contemplation devoid of any psychological shock or any state of known exaltation, trance, ecstasy, or hypnosis. Each disciple must observe strict vegetarianism and must perform all the required daily rituals and contemplation. In learning the disciple of meditation, the adept strives, to achieve the progressive extinction of its inferior self. In doing so he eventually identifies himself with the Absolute; his soul achieves integration with the Dao, the Infinite.

The Esoteric and Exoteric Schools are not parallel to each other as are the Illinayana and Mayayana schools of Buddhism. Rather, members of the Esoteric School are said to be more advanced, having gone further in their spiritual evolution. An adept of the Esoteric School must abandon his rank and function in the Exoteric School if he has one. Disciples of the Esoteric School do not preach or spread their doctrine for it is reserved to the Elect. Disciples must work to nourish themselves since they are not supported by any organization nor are they paid by the offerings of the faithful. According to one source, the primary difference between the Exoteric and Esoteric schools is that in the former, salvation is an act of faith, in the latter it is a path of discipline.

³¹ Caodaiism: Historical and Doctrinal Glimpse, p. 35.

³² Ibid., p. 36.

Organization and Ritual in the Exoteric School

As the branch responsible for the propagation of the Cao Dai gospel, the Exoteric School fields a large and well-organized hierarchy with a large number of elaborate temples and rituals. Caodaism is organized on a provincial and sometimes even a district level. Within the Tay Ninh sect, provision is made for a temporal government branch which has held some to claim Caodaism is a “feudal” sect.

There are three principle administrative branches which carry out quasi-government functions at the Holy See in Tay Ninh. The *Cuu Trung Dai* has executive powers and controls the temporal administration and at one time the armed forces of Caodaism. The *Hiệp Thiên Dai* is the legislative body which rules in religious affairs. The *Co-quan Phuc-thiên* is the welfare agency of the church, taking responsibility for the poor and invalid members of the Cao Dai community.

The *Giao Tong* or Pope is the head of the *Cuu Trung Dai*. Contrary to popular belief, there is no living Pope of the Cao Dai; this role is filled by the spirit of *Ly Tai Pe* one of the ancient Chinese poets and presently, according to Caodaists, a spiritual governor of the world. During, his lifetime, *Le Van Trung*, the first Great Master of the faith, ranked only as interim pope. “To carry out its tasks, the *Cuu Trung Dai* has nine ministries (*viên*): interior (*lai*), rites (*le*), security (*hoa*), finance (*ho*), supply (*luong*), education (*hoc*), agriculture (*nong*), public words (*cong*), and health (*y*), which further reinforce the ‘state-within-a-state’ aspects of the sect.”³³

The most powerful living person in Tay Ninh is the *Ho Phap*, the head of the *Hiệp Thiên Dai*, the legislative body. *Pham Cong Tac* was the most powerful and renowned holder of this position. With two assistants, the *Ho Phap* presides over a council of twelve members (*Thap-nhi Thoi-quan*) which governs a hierarchy of prelates and lower clergy. The *Ho Phap* controls the manipulations of the beaked bag at Tay Ninh; prior to World War II, *Pham Cong Tac* made use of the beaked bag and spirit messages to foment anti-french feeling. These hierarchics have parallel functions in many cases; Caodaists maintain that division of the temporal power into two branches prevents dictatorship.

Three cardinals of the *Cuu Trung Dai* or executive body control the actual administrative of the religion. They are assigned by three principle archbishops which represents the three great-religions, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. The Buddhists are in charge of finances, supply and public works; the Taoists, education, health, and agriculture; the

³³ Fall, “Political-Religious Sects,” p. 239.

Confucianists, interior, rites, and justice.³⁴ In provinces where Caodaism has a considerable following, there are province, district, and even village chiefs. This local hierarchy is the source of Caodaism's great political power.

The Cao Dai cult requires that its followers address daily prayers to the Supreme Being at six-hour intervals (6 A.M., noon, 6 P.M., and midnight). The rituals commence with the offering of incense and knowledge. The prayers (khai kinh) consists of a canticle to the glory of God which is recited in unison and three additional canticles changed in honor of Confucius, Lao Tze, and Buddha. Occasionally, priests will exhort the adepts to practice a virtuous life along Confucian guidelines and to venerate various spirits such as Christ, Buddha, Confucius, and ancient Chinese deities. Traditional Buddhist fetes and even Christmas are observed with more elaborate ceremonies.³⁵

The Path of the Adept

The man who wishes to be converted to Caodaism must be introduced by two Cao Dai followers; an introduction ceremony is performed at the local oratory or temple. Following his introduction, the Cao Dai follower must be a vegetarian at least six days of every month and they must observe the three regulations and the five commandments.

“Every adept should make his own living and keep himself to a permanent triple obligation: 1) Toward the Divine Master; acts of veneration according to established ritual: DEVOTION 2) Towards the world: acts of benefaction according to the means available to him: SERVICE 3) Towards oneself: acts of moral and spiritual purification: PURIFICATION.”³⁶

Universal love is preached by Caodaism; it is manifested in acts of brotherhood, kindness to animals (less evolved brothers), kindness towards plants (which provide us with shade and medicines). A good Caodaist will come to the assistance of anyone in need for such exemplary behaviour will assure his own salvation as well as win converts to Caodaism.

³⁴ Tay Ninh, Outline of Caodaism, p. 13.

³⁵ U.S. Army, Minority Groups in Vietnam, p. 849.

³⁶ Caodaism: Historical and Doctrinal Glimpse, p. 30-1.

Purity of body, action, language, and thought are the goals of a Caodaist. Vegetarianism contributes to purity of the body. Conduct is regulated to the five commandments:

1. Do not kill living beings – because of the life, the center of consciousness, which resides within them.
2. Do not be covetous – in order to avoid falling into materialism through the need for possessions and domination.
3. Do not eat meat or drink alcohol.
4. Do not be tempted by the sensual.
5. Do not lie – verbal sins are as punishable as accomplished crimes.³⁷

By means of a twofold path, self-improvement and contemplation of the Dao, the adept is able to free himself very gradually from the wheel of birth and death. Each individual must first of all improve himself and then work to return to the family, society, and the world the debt that he owes. Contemplation of the Dao is necessary if Cao Dai is to reveal Himself in all his purity and mystery. In his upward journey, Man passes through five levels of self-liberation: Purity (shila), Meditation (dhyana), Wisdom (prajna), superior knowledge (dharma), and finally, Karmic liberation (apavarga).³⁸

Admission into the circles of the Esoteric School is much more difficult than admission into the Exoteric School. An adept must first of all abandon his rank and function in the Exoteric sect. He must observe strict vegetarianism at all times, not just six days a month. In addition to fulfilling the various commandments, the adept must receive one hundred days of instruction and guidance from older disciples of the Esoteric School, some of whom are members of Ngo Van Chieu's original group. Full initiation into the Esoteric School requires consultation with the supernatural to seek permission for the adept to attend a séance held by the older disciples. If the Invisible grants permission, the adept may be instructed by an older disciple in the secret esoteric methods of Ngo Van Chieu; mediumship may be attained.

Once a man is initiated into the faith; once the threshold is crossed, the adept devotes himself to simple prayer and meditation outside his working hours. This spiritual exercise practiced faithfully enables the believer to stand aloof from the world of sense, to rid himself of slavery to his body and the material desires which distract his soul from attaining the life of

³⁷ U.S. Army, *Minority Groups in Vietnam*, p. 850.

³⁸ Tay Ninh, *The Outline of Caodaism*, p. 16.

perfection. Gradually he lifts his soul toward the Universal Soul itself. When this inner withdrawal from the world is carried to its utmost abstraction, the human soul is able to identify itself with the Universal Soul. Truth penetrates and illumines the worshipper's soul and he is no longer lured by the illusory appearance of anything in the world.

At the highest degree of ascension, the believer feels within his soul the full awakening of superior knowledge and this enables him to perceive all eternal truths and embrace without difficulty the entire scope of the past and the future. This state of ultimate wisdom frees Man at last; he can stand to contemplate the Divine Light which purifies, illumines, and beautifies. This is the path of salvation open to Man, the way which leads to liberation from karma and its chains.³⁹

IV. CONCLUSION

In coming to some conclusion as to Caodaism's validity as a philosophical expression, it is difficult to establish criteria to make such a judgement. Should it be judge on its originality? Such a criteria would not be consistent with the stated aims of the religion itself. Perhaps, it is possible to judge Caodaism on its success as a universal religion.

In professing to be religion which resolves all the differences between other religions, Caodaism seems to look more like a hodge-podge rather than a unifying whole. Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that Caodaism itself is not unified, a fact which produces embarrassment in some Caodaists and a rationalization on the part of others. That the one true religion should be divided up into so many different sects is due to one fundamental weakness in its philosophical framework. I believe the weakness is Caodaism's reliance on spiritualism; the very vehicle by which the Caodaists sought to correct the racial and cultural vanity of Man contributes to the ultimate downfall of their religion. If one man can receive a spirit message, surely any man can; what proof is there that one man's spirit message will not directly contradict the truth in another man's message? The division within Caodaism itself seems ample proof of this statement. How many varying interpretations can there be of all can make equal claim to Divine guidance? Those at Tay Ninh would claim to monopolize the truth; the other sects immediately assert their truths as well.

There is one criteria which Caodaism does meet, however. It seems to fulfil a basic need within the Vietnamese personality. Ngo Van Chieu, its founder, was a Vietnamese brought up in traditional society but was forced to adapt to a world in which French education and philosophy were regarded very highly. The Vietnamese society of the Mekong delta is a poorly

³⁹ Tay Ninh, "The Outline of Caodaism", p. 17.

integrated society; it is a region which has felt the thrust of Indian, Chinese, Moslem, and even Western philosophical traditions. By seeking to blend all known religious influences into one philosophical unity, Caodaism resolves the conflict within the Vietnamese personality. It puts the Vietnamese stamp on the myriad foreign influences which have for centuries permeated and destabilized Vietnamese society.

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Interviews

Personal Interview with Tran Thai Chan (alias Dong Tan) a Caodaist poet and historian. This gentleman has written several comprehensive books dealing with the history of the Caodaist movement. He is a member of the Exoteric sect in Central Vietnam the Truyen Giao Cao Dai of Da Nang. He is also a close friend and confidante of the members of the Esoteric School in Saigon. Chan is the founder and leader of the Cao Dai Cultural Association (Hoi Van Hoa Cao Dai). Much of my information was obtained through questions I submitted to Chan and his association. Members of both the Esoteric and Exoteric Schools aided him in answering.