

**seeing syncretism  
as visual blasphemy:  
critical eyes on  
caodai religious  
architecture  
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## ABSTRACT

The exuberant, eclectic architecture of the Caodai Holy See in French Indochina was described as a “grotesque combination” of European and Asian elements by several famous writers and this sense of horror served to construct a notion of “visual blasphemy” which merged aesthetic and ethical elements. Architecture is always read and misread through a cultural lens. It has been argued that the colonial “world as staged” (Mitchell 1999) produced its own “reality-effects,” so I argue that an anti-colonial counter project of large public works tied to an innovative Asian synthesis of world religions served not only to bolster the morale of a once downtrodden people but also to convince them of the historical inevitability of their triumph. Caodaism was a new religious movement followed by 3 million people in French Indochina and its daring and “presumptuous” architecture was a visual act of insurrection, an iconographic revolution designed to precede and prepare the way for the political revolution to follow.

**Keywords:** syncretism, new religions, Vietnam, blasphemy, colonial perspectives, alternative aesthetics

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This cathedral must be the most outrageously vulgar building ever to have been erected with serious intent.

Norman Lewis, *A Dragon Apparent*, 1951

Phạm Công Tắc built the splendid Holy See against French opposition and without any formal training as an architect or engineer. It is the most impressive complex of religious buildings in all of Vietnam.

Hum Dac Bui, *Caodai: Faith of Unity*, 2001

The tension between these two different views of Caodai architecture has had a tremendous impact on the history of this new religion and its reception on the global stage: One, by a revered British travel writer, reduces it to a travesty of bad taste; the other, by a follower, expresses the conviction shared by many Caodaists that the construction of their “Holy See” or Vatican was the greatest achievement of their Head Spirit Medium and most famous twentieth-century leader. The critical perspective of European observers is, I will argue, tied to the political economy of colonial sarcasm. These ironic and disparaging descriptions must be understood in a historical context where Caodaism presented itself as an inversion of European ways of looking. Its eclectic, syncretistic pantheon came to be perceived as aesthetically blasphemous, in an intriguing series of reversals of Eastern and Western perspectives.

Caodaism is the largest of Vietnam’s “indigenous religions” (Phạm Bích Hợp 2007) with 3–6 million followers within its homeland and perhaps 50,000 overseas. As part of an ethnographic and historical study of its transnational dimensions (Hoskins 2005, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2009), I examine the reasons for both the vehement condemnations of Caodai architecture in 1950s’ French Indochina (by Lewis and his more famous friend Graham Greene) and the resurgence of tourist interest in the twenty-first century. Both British writers fancied themselves critics of colonialism (Pratt 1992), but were horrified by the “grotesque combination” of European and Asian elements in Caodai architecture. Greene’s much quoted description of the temple as “a Walt Disney fantasia of the East” with “dragons and snakes in technicolour” (Greene 1966 [1954]: 84) has shaped perceptions of this new religion from the colonial period to the globalized present.

### **Caodai’s Visible Theology and Its Instrumentality**

The key icon of Caodaism is the left eye of God (*thiên nhãn*), appearing at the top of every one of its altars, as well as on its flag, its publications and the tall headdress worn by high-ranking ritual specialists in its major

ceremonies. Sometimes placed inside a triangle, with the rays of the sun projecting outward from all sides, it bears an uncanny resemblance to Freemason images of a “divine eye,” and even the “eye of Providence” on the US dollar bill. In Caodai tradition, the left eye appeared in the rising sun, with the moon and stars also visible, in a vision received by the ascetic mystic Ngô Văn Chiêu on the island of Phú Quốc in 1921. Four years later, a spiritist circle in Saigon contacted him to say that the Jade Emperor, Cao Đài, had dictated spirit messages uniting the teachings of Buddha, Confucius and Lao Tzu with those of Jesus, Moses and Muhammad. Synthesizing Asian traditions under a new masculine monotheism, the movement attracted over a million followers within the first decade of its existence. Caodai teachings challenged Orientalist ideas of Asian passivity by asserting that Eastern philosophies were dynamic, progressive and positive. The left side in Sino-Vietnamese symbolism is yang (Viet *đương*), so by identifying the Supreme Being with Daoist ideas of the left, the teachings of Asian sages were presented as encompassing and preceding Christian teachings, but also fundamentally compatible with them. It combined a move to reconcile opposing sides by healing the wounds of colonialism and an assertion that Asian peoples deserved the right of self-determination.

The public, proselytizing side of Caodaism is often called the “way of the eye” (*Đạo mắt*) and it is opposed to the more private, introspective “way of the heart” (*Đạo tâm*) that emphasizes silence and meditation. Phạm Công Tắc was the leader of the largest visible, exoteric (*Phổ Đệ*) branch whose headquarters in Tay Ninh has now become a major tourist destination in southern Vietnam. As the Hộ Pháp (“Defender of the Faith”) of the Tây Ninh Vatican or Holy See (Tòa Thánh), he fashioned a modernist millenarianism designed to develop a new kind of agency, giving the Vietnamese people the confidence that they could change the course of history and were, in fact, destined to do so. Drawing on the power of older prophecies that “One day, a country now in servitude will become the master teacher of all humanity” (Đỗ Vạn Lý 1989: 25), Caodai teachings designated the Vietnamese as a “chosen people” who would lead the world to a final reconciliation of religious differences.

Born in the urban spaces of Saigon, Caodaism became the largest mass movement in French Indochina by building a following in the same areas as the Indochina Communist Party and functioning at times as a political force in itself (Werner 1980). Rather than arguing (as some French observers did) that it was a political party “masquerading as a religion” (Thompson 1937), I place

Caodaism within the ethnography of religions that promote the emblems, narratives and technologies of aspiring nations, assembling a new pantheon as an instrument of national liberation.

Caodaism is a revealed religion, with an elaborate hierarchical structure and set of laws received by spirit mediums from 1925 to 1934, but it was established within the “community of three religions” (*cộng đồng tam giáo*) that had blended Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism for centuries (Jammes 2006; Oliver 1976; Taylor 2004, 2007; Thien Do 2004; Werner 1981). Several important Caodai figures (Lê Văn Duyệt, Trần Hưng Đạo) were taken from the historical repertoire of Vietnamese heroes, scholars and resistance leaders, but others came from literary and historical figures that the early disciples studied in French language schools (Victor Hugo, La Fontaine, Jeanne d’Arc).

Colonial French administrators worried that Caodaists had hijacked the Christian idea of monotheism—a direct, personal relationship with God—and transferred it to the Jade Emperor, as well as “importing” many of the organizational features of the Vatican’s administrative hierarchy, since there was a Caodai Pope, male and female cardinals, bishops and priests (Lalauette and Vilmont 1931). Designating the Great Temple at Tây Ninh in French as a “Holy See” was a deliberate strategy to claim that colonial authorities should grant the Caodai ecclesiastical hierarchy the same legal status as the leaders of the Catholic Church. I argue that this was perceived as form of “visual blasphemy,” a kidnapping of the image of Jesus, who is then held hostage in the alien kingdom of an East Asian pantheon. But since blasphemy is defined as a “crime of words,” how can we speak of blasphemy if few Westerners ever bothered to read Caodai scriptures? The theoretical challenges of elaborating a notion of blasphemy in a visual as opposed to a textual idiom are considered here as a transposition of ethical into aesthetic discourse.

Famous descriptions by Greene and Lewis had the unintended effect of increasing tourist interest in visiting the Caodai Holy See and also prophesying its expansion overseas. In 1952, Graham Greene predicted that Caodaism would find its only other spiritual home in the destination he then perceived as the capital of commercial vulgarity; “One should not therefore be surprised to learn that missionaries have been sent to Los Angeles” (Pratt 1996: 219). There is no record of any missionaries being sent to California before 1975. But he did prove prophetic, since it is in the New Age landscape of California that Caodaism is now growing and flourishing and there may

even be a certain elective affinity between this “Asian fusion” faith with its spirit of anti-colonial resistance and the extremely commoditized but also strangely “spiritual” terrain of modern Los Angeles. Recent commentaries on Caodai iconography from Caodaist authors (some writing from Los Angeles) provide alternative readings of this hybrid architecture as the visual basis for a “global faith of unity” (Bui 2001; Hồng 2005; Lý 1989).

### **Graham Greene and Norman Lewis: Aesthetics and Imperial Eyes**

Norman Lewis’s statement is the most blatant dismissal of a whole religion in the name of “bad taste,” but his evaluation (quoted in *The Lonely Planet Guide to Vietnam, Discover, Moon Handbooks*) might have gone unnoticed had it not been read by Graham Greene, who reviewed the galleys of Lewis’s book and decided to travel to Indochina himself. His vivid prose came to define the attitudes of a generation:

The dragons with lion-like heads climbed the pulpit: on the roof, Christ exposed his bleeding heart. Buddha sat, as Buddha always sits, with his lap empty. Confucius’ beard hung meagerly down like a waterfall in the dry season. This was playacting: the great globe above the altar was ambition: the basket with the movable lid in which the Pope worked his prophecy was trickery. (1966 [1954]: 86)

The rest is literary history: *The Quiet American* was the favorite book of a whole generation of American journalists, who admired it for its skillful depiction of the problematic detachment of the narrator and the moral irony of his stance. As John Lawrence wrote in a recent memoir: “We were all Thomas Fowler for a time. Seen through the imagery of Greene’s masterful story telling, Saigon seemed more exciting, more mysterious, more sensual to the innocent eyes of young war reporters. We imagined comparable dramas happening to us and eventually they did, although they would not seem so romantic at the time” (Lawrence 2002: 306).

Greene saw the “ambition” incarnated in the great globe above the altar as pretentious and pompous, an unseemly attempt by colonial subjects to imagine that they could ever achieve ascendancy over the great minds of the Western world. But, since all religions are inherently “pretentious,” in the sense that they must “pretend” to be in contact with huge transcendent forces whose presence is not empirically verifiable, the question remains: How are Vietnamese “pretensions” at universal religion different from European and American ones and what can we learn from these differences?

## Caodai Theology as Blasphemy? Alternative Readings of Its Architecture

According to Caodai scripture, each feature of the Holy See was mandated by instructions received in spirit séances, most of them coming from the “Invisible Pope” Lý Thái Bạch, the sixth-century Taoist poet Li Bái known for his love of nature and inebriated versifying. From the front, the vast structure looks like a French Gothic cathedral (Figure 1), with a nave, separate entrances for men and women and a series of nine separate levels advancing towards an octagonal inner sanctuary (Figure 2) where the Left Eye of God is represented on a huge globe (Figure 3). Open latticework windows with a



**FIG 1**  
The front of the Tây Ninh Great Temple (a) looks like a French Gothic cathedral but, from the side (b), an onion dome and an eight-sided tower reveal an Asian rear.

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**FIG 2**  
Dragons and lotus flowers decorate the pillars of the Great Temple, evoking the final day of judgment (the “Dragon Flower Assembly”).



**FIG 3**

The Left Eye of God on the globe at the back of the Great Temple.



lotus-enclosed eye design line the sides (Figure 4) and nine dragons coil on pastel columns of lotus flowers. The relatively “European” exterior opens up onto an intensely Asian interior in which hierarchical rank and levels of spiritual attainment are mapped vertically and horizontally as disciples approach the altar. The Pope and his six cardinals sit on special thrones in front of the altar, while the Head Spirit Medium stands with his back to the entrance, in front of the “khi” character for breath or vital force, dressed in the splendid armor of a general, carrying an exorcist’s staff in his left hand and the beads of compassion in his right (Figure 5).

Caodai commentators describe this “combination of three principal architectures” as modeling the dimensions of a syncretistic theology: “The Catholicism is marked by its verticality (bell tower and drum tower), the Buddhism by its horizontality (the Nine Sphere Palace in the middle and the Octagonal Palace in the rear) and the Islamism by its sphericity” (Bui 1992: 32). The “verticality” of the “Catholic front” was presented to French authorities to command their attention, but the more sacred spaces are



**FIG 4**

The Left Eye of God inside the triangle in the lattice work window.



inside and illustrate nine ascending levels of spirituality, in a gradation reminiscent of Vietnamese pagodas. The highest ranking dignitaries are seated at the opposite end of the Gothic exterior, nearest to the Octagonal Palace (Bát

**FIG 5**

The first three spirit mediums: Phạm Công Tắc (the Hộ Pháp, at the center) with his assistants for religious and secular affairs beside him in the Great Temple at Tây Ninh.



**FIG 6**

Tây Ninh dignitaries dressed in red (representing Confucianism), turquoise (Daoism) and yellow (Buddhism) robes.



Quái Đài) named after the eight trigrams used in Daoist divination. This is where the invisible spirits reside, since their coming together was prophesied in the *Dao de Jing* (Bui 1992: 13). Two spheres rise over the roof of the Holy See: the Islamic onion dome over the center (Figure 6), where disciples kneel on cushions as they meditate to music, topped with a map of the world and the dragon boat used to carry the deceased in funeral processions, and the Octagonal Palace at the back (hovering over the globe with the divine eye, topped with the Hindu figures of Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu). The Hindu deities are described as earlier forms of the Buddha and the “sphericity” of Islam encircles earlier Asian traditions since Muhammad is seen as carrying forward the same basic message as these spiritual predecessors.

Above the great Eye hangs a pediment in front of a blue curtain, picturing the world’s spiritual leaders on five levels (Figure 7): Buddha sits at the apex, flanked by Lao Tzu on his right and Confucius on his left, with Lý Thái Bạch below him and the female Bodhisattva Quan Âm to his right and the red-faced warrior Quan Công on his

**FIG 7**

The Tây Ninh pantheon as pictured on the pediment of the Caodai temple in Garden Grove, California.



left. Below them, on the third level, is Jesus and then below him is Khương Thượng, a figure representing the veneration of local spirits and heroes. Buddha represents the ideal of enlightenment, while Lao Tzu and Lý Thái Bạch stand for the “way of the immortals” (*Đạo tiên*), Jesus for the “way of the saints” (*Đạo thánh*, which includes Judaism and Islam) and the final level for the “way of humanity.” Jesus is placed three levels below Buddha, because he came after Buddha in history, but since Lý Thái Bạch is also placed higher than Jesus (although he was born six centuries later), this “chronological” order becomes hard to defend. Each “way” is said to be valid and valuable for those who follow it, since all these spiritual leaders were sent by the Jade Emperor, Cao Đài.

Lewis was especially horrified by this feature of the “palace in candy form from a coloured fantasy by Disney, an example of funfair architecture in extreme form”:

Over the doorway was a grotesquely undignified piece of statuary showing Jesus Christ borne upon the shoulders of Lao Tse and in his turn carrying Confucius and Buddha. They are made to look like Japanese acrobats about to begin their act. Once inside, one expected continually to hear bellowing laughter relayed from some nearby Tunnel of Love (1951: 44)

Intriguingly, while his description stresses how “undignified” it is to bring these religious leaders together, it inaccurately portrays Jesus as placed higher than Lao Tzu but below Confucius and Buddha, when in fact the opposite is true: The “way of the Buddha” is the top level of spiritual attainment, then the “way of the immortals,” and finally Jesus’ “way of the saints” (Figure 7). The full “indignity” must have been unimaginable.

Cao Đài literally means “the highest tower” but, unlike the Old Testament image of Jehovah (who was also called “Cao Đài” in British Bible Society translations), this Supreme Being is often humorous, smiling and joking with his followers, even teasing them about their costumes or their weaknesses and vanities. Drawing on Buddhist millenarianism but asserting that their Supreme God sent Western prophets (like Jesus and Muhammad) as well as Eastern ones, Caodaists envision the end of the European Age of Empire as the closing of a cosmic cycle. The Bible had prophesied that God would “come like a thief” (2 Peter 3:10) and “at an hour when you do not expect him” (Matthew 24:42–44). At a séance held at midnight Christmas Eve, 1925, three Vietnamese who worked for the French colonial administration received spirit messages from the Supreme Being, announcing the inauguration of the “third revelation” (Bui 1992: 12–13). The dragon and lotus pillars (Figure 2) mark the nearness of the “Dragon Flower Assembly,” a final Judgment Day at the end of the world and the figure of the Maitreya Buddha riding on the back of a tiger on the roof also signals that this day has been announced in 1926, the zodiacal Year of the Tiger.

Séances should be held in the Cung Đạo, directly in front of the globe with the divine eye (Figure 3), by placing a phoenix-headed basket on the table, held by two spirit mediums, whose involuntary movements trace the letters of divine messages in the cursive script of *quốc ngữ* (romanized Vietnamese taught in colonial schools). Incense sticks are lit and attached to the top of the carved head and the mediums focus their attention on the image of the eye (Figure 4), surrounded by rays of sunlight, guided by the teaching that “the eye is the principle of the heart, a source of light, representing divinity” (Bui 2001: 34). Statues of the founding three mediums who “unite humanity with the celestial realm” (*Hiệp Thiên Đài*) show them standing on lotus flowers (Figure 5). The religious assistant (Thượng Phẩm) holds an exorcist’s fan, made of thirty-six swan feathers attached to a sacred quill, capable of chasing away wandering ghosts and sending them off to the other world. The secular assistant (Thượng Sanh) carries the “sword of separation,” which shows how wisdom can separate those who know from those who do not. They wear white silk with blue panels, but the Head Spirit Medium (Hộ Pháp) is dressed in gold armor, protected by three hooded serpents who rise behind his throne and stomp on the four heads of temptation serpents coiled under his feet (Bui 1992, 2001; Nguyễn Văn Hồng 2005).

The great cathedral of the Caodai Holy See was finished during the colonial period and inaugurated to



**FIG 8**  
 Đỗ Vạn Lý, former South Vietnamese Ambassador to the United States (1963) and Japan (1971–4) led the first congregations in Los Angeles.

celebrate independence in 1955. Sixty-five other pavilions were built, including orphanages, hospitals, workshops, meditation/retirement centers and even a fledgling university. This great sacred city presented an image of the state in its theatrical form, not in the sense of play-acting but of constructing itself by putting on spectacular public works. A charismatic notion of statecraft is an ancient proposition and one that Clifford Geertz has articulated clearly for Southeast Asia in his writings on the “theater state” (1980) in which the stateliness of power is itself an ordering force. The Tây Ninh Holy See became a capital in its own right, center of a radiating empire and an authority to a mass of members. Its two overlapping hierarchies of office share with modern states an affinity for bureaucratic complexity, opposing administrative functions (the “executive branch” of the Nine Level Palace) and religious ones (the “legislative/justice branch” or College of Spirit Mediums, which “receives” the laws in spirit séances). But once the “aspirational nationalism” of revolutionary struggle was replaced by the “official nationalism” of the new Republic, new problems surfaced in defining the relation of religious leaders to the state.

The Head Spirit Medium Phạm Công Tắc, who had already spent six years in French prisons (1940–6) for opposing colonial rule, was exiled again in 1956, since the Diệm regime was unsympathetic to his advocacy of “peaceful coexistence” between the communist north and the republican south. After his death in Cambodia in 1959 and Diệm’s assassination (with US complicity) in 1963, Caodaiism started a new chapter in Saigon, gathering those disillusioned by a succession of American-dominated governments and preaching a return to Asian ideals of personal purity, esoteric discipline and a “spiritual nationalism” separate from the corrupting influences of political instability and military conflict.

The new Caodai Teaching Center, founded in 1965 by a philosophy professor and the former South Vietnamese Ambassador to the United States, Đỗ Vạn Lý (Figure 8), began to hold a new series of séances during the years of American military intervention. These séances attracted a new generation of college-educated professionals who lived in Saigon, focusing on Vietnamese heroes rather than Chinese figures and deliberately keeping a distance from Americanized forms of consumerism. Lý explained its orientation by referring to the differences between the right and left eyes:

The Vietnamese and the Americans are the two peoples who worship under the sign of the eye. We have it on our temples, you have it on a sacred object in your society—the

dollar bill. Yours is the right eye. Ours is the left eye. They complement each other. The left eye is closer to the heart. It is connected to morality, tradition and ethics. The right eye is closer to the brain. It is connected to technology, industry and development. America has given the idea of democracy to the world, but they have lost the ethical dimension. One day there will be a people that will develop that ideal of democracy and bring it back to the world with its original ethics. These people will be the Vietnamese. (Interview with Đỗ Văn Lý, 2005, Chatsworth, California)

The year 1975 had appeared in early Caodai messages as a pivotal year, when the three regions of Vietnam would become one and a new era of globalization would begin. In April, when Saigon fell and millions of refugees tried to escape by planes, helicopters and boats, the “exodus” prophesied for the chosen people became a reality. Caodaists overseas now interpret these political events as part of a divine plan, which sent them off to dozens of different countries in order to spread their faith and make it more widely known (Bui 2001; Đỗ Văn Lý 1989). California has the largest number of overseas temples, but congregations are established in France, Australia, Canada, Belgium, Germany and Indonesia. Replicas of the Tây Ninh cathedral have recently been constructed in Sydney, Australia, New Orleans and Garden Grove, California (2007) (Figure 9).

The intense discomfort that Norman Lewis and Graham Greene experienced in visiting these colorful, eclectic structures is replicated in twenty-first-century travelers’ descriptions of Caodaism as a “weird” religion (Jensen 2000) and a journalist’s Internet article referring



**FIG 9**  
The California Temple in Garden Grove, completed in 2007, from the front.

**FIG 10**

Painting of Victor Hugo at the entrance to the Tây Ninh temple with Sun Yat-sen and Trạng Trình (Vietnamese poet and prophet of the sixteenth century) beside him.



to it as the “congregation of kitsch” (Gluckman 2002). For novelists like Greene and Lewis, the “colonial appropriation” of literary figures like Victor Hugo (and La Fontaine, Rousseau, Descartes, Shakespeare and Aristotle) into an Asian pantheon may have been at least as offensive as the incorporation of Jesus. The inclusion of Western historical and literary figures in the Caodai pantheon is, however, far from a glorification of Occidental culture. On the contrary, it honors a few brave critics while sounding the death knells for Western imperial rule.

Victor Hugo (Figure 10), the great enemy of Napoleon the Third who conquered Indochina, speaks in séances to condemn colonial conquest and the “tyranny of potentates.” As an opponent of capital punishment and a defender of the oppressed, Hugo condemns French crackdowns on religious dissidents and apologizes for the nation whose literary ambitions he once incarnated. In 1949, on the anniversary of Hugo’s death, Tắc revealed Hugo was in fact the more recent incarnation of the famous Vietnamese poet Nguyễn Du, giving him a spiritual lineage that fused European and Asian poetic traditions. Victor Hugo remains the “spiritual head of the Overseas Mission” for Tây Ninh Caodaists and should, in principle, be consulted about how to translate Caodai scriptures for a wider world. But since the Socialist Republic of Vietnam has prohibited séances within the sanctuary of the Tây Ninh “Vatican,” there have been no official pronouncements from him for over thirty years.

Jeanne d’Arc, a village girl who heard voices that told her to rise up against an occupying army, says that “an oppressed people once raised to consciousness will prove impossible to defeat.” Shakespeare, although praised for having inspired an empire “without borders or truces,” is

informed that the glory days of British Asia are over and after a great war the godless colonial administration will “march into an abyss” and perish as well (Trần Quang Vinh 1962: 58, 90, 108).

Caodai scriptures contain reference to current events (and so the names of many public figures appear), but there have been no official messages from European spirits since the 1930s. Clifford Geertz (pers. com. 2005) described it as a “*syncretisme à l’outrance*,” an excessive, even transgressive blending of East and West with something to offend everyone. If the eclecticism of Caodaism is its main trait, why is it grouped with kitsch, vulgarity and forms of popular religion that are seen to flirt with blasphemy?

### **“Visual Blasphemy” and Imperial Spectacle**

Every epoch, in fact, not only dreams the one to follow, but in dreaming, precipitates its awakening.

Walter Benjamin, “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century” (1935), in *Arcades Project*

Monsieur Ferry, a French colonial official, told Norman Lewis in 1950 that the Caodai Holy See “looked like a fantasy from the brain of Disney and all the faiths of the Orient had been ransacked to create the pompous ritual” (Lewis 1951: 112). In taking apart this sentence, which could be considered the “ancestor” of the better known ones already quoted from Lewis, Greene and Jensen, we note that it has three key elements: (1) the link to Disney, suggesting a childlike, fantastic and credulous attitude; (2) the suggestion that other faiths have been “ransacked” and had their true content “stolen”; and (3) a charge that its ritual is “pompous,” ostentatious, overblown and bombastic.

I will take up each of these terms in reverse order, starting with the third, since it highlights the parallels between Caodai architecture and imperial spectacle. French architects of the turn of the twentieth century used their colonies as the “laboratory of modernity,” spending enormous amounts of government funds on monumental construction projects that would exemplify the *grandeur* of *La plus grande France*. Huge theaters were constructed in both Saigon (in 1904) and Hanoi (in 1911), the one in Hanoi being a smaller replica of the Paris Opera House, with a capacity of 900 seats so that every single one of the city’s French residents could both see and be seen within it. “La mission civilisatrice” that the French espoused was seen as physically incarnated in a series of public works (including the still standing Hôtel de Ville



(completed in 1908), Notre Dame Cathedral (1883) and a truly magnificent central Post Office (1892). Architectural historian Gwendolyn Wright entitled her chapter on French Indochina “La Folie de Grandeur” because, in this most distant colony, no expense was spared to erect immense, elaborate structures that would fix French imperial power in stone, providing visible and tangible proof of colonial cultural superiority (Wright 1987, 1991).

The Beaux Arts formalism (ornamented with classical and baroque elements) of the earliest colonial structures was purely French, but by the 1930s it became acceptable to develop new hybrid styles with Southeast Asian decorative motifs grafted onto the outside of the École Française d’Extrême-Orient museum in Hanoi. A palatial museum built to house the collections of Orientalists was designed by French architect Ernest Hébrard, completed in 1933 and described as “one of Hanoi’s most shimmering architectural showpieces” (*Lonely Planet* 2006: 252). Hébrard took it upon himself to create a new “Indochinese style,” which would be “based on studies of Indochinese monuments without copying them” (Hébrard 1935: 34), so he assiduously photographed and sketched local architectural landmarks, which the École Française was also cataloging for preservation. He advocated the use of “indigenous artisans” to work on the ornamentation, but noted that their technical skills could only be excised “within well defined limits” (Hébrard 1935: 34). It never occurred to him, however, that in 1929, the same year that he presented his own blueprint for a huge structure to house French research about the Orient, a group of Vietnamese religious leaders in Tây Ninh began building their own version of an “Indochinese style” cathedral merging vernacular architecture with French monumentalism. Lewis’s description of the Tây Ninh cathedral as “the monstrous result of a marriage between a pagoda and a Southern Baroque church” (1951: 44) could be applied to Hébrard’s new museum as well. However, since it housed European Orientalists rather than Vietnamese spirit mediums, its blending of styles was seen as stylish rather than “vulgar.”

In 1931, a huge Colonial Exposition was held in Paris, visited by 8 million people, in which 110 hectares were filled with pavilions of “authentic architecture” from each of France’s colonies, crowned by an almost life-size copy of the Cambodian temple Angkor Wat (Morton 2000). A future Caodai leader, Trần Quang Vinh, was the “secretaire indigène” of the art museum of Indochina where this exhibit was prepared and he spent over nine months in Paris, along with other native artisans, dancers and performers who came to put themselves (and their

**FIG 11**

Trần Quang Vinh in a ceremony at the Holy See in 1948. From *Le Caodaïsme en Images*, edited by Marguerite Gobron and made up of photographs supplied by Trần Quang Vinh (Paris, Dervy 1949). Image prepared for use by the Caodai Overseas Mission. Reproduced with permission.



“culture”) on display. In his autobiography, Vinh describes how he divided his time between his work at the exhibition and his “religious mission” to seek out French spiritists, Freemasons and lawyers to defend this new faith against charges it was a subversive secret society. He converted French writers and philosophers who wrote appreciative accounts of Caodaism (G. Gobron 1947, M. Gobron 1949), spoke to the Ligue des Droits de l’Homme and described Caodaists imprisoned by the colonial government as “*les Martyrs de la Foi Nouvelle*” (Vinh 1969: 111). Drawing skillfully on the legacy of nineteenth-century missionary propaganda (whose stories of martyred French priests justified the conquest of Indochina), he created a lobbying force within France to defend religious freedom in Saigon. Ties were established with French Theosophists and the editors of *La Revue Spirite* and maintained over the years by publishing in French journals. In 1936, this lobby persuaded French Governor Robin to allow hundreds of new Caodai temples to be opened. In 1938, the Minister of the Colonies authorized the dedication of a cathedral, despite protests from colonial officials that Caodaism was unmistakably nationalist (Trinh Dinh Khai 1994: 54–5). The leftist “Front Populaire” government was mobilized against the entrenched power of nervous French residents in the colony.

On his return from France, Vinh was welcomed at a séance which revealed that he was the spiritual son of Victor Hugo, who had been sent on this mission by his spiritual father. His spiritual father came down to greet him and congratulate him on his achievements, using Hugo’s preferred verse form of alexandrine couplets. In 1940, Phạm Công Tắc was arrested by the French and exiled to a Madagascar prison. Vinh formed a militia that supported

the Japanese coup against the French in March 1945 and joined the resistance in the August revolution. Communist reprisals later in that month, however, drove Caodaists (like Catholics, Trotskyites and Hoa Hao Buddhists) to form their own defense forces. In 1946, French soldiers captured Vinh and he was able to negotiate for the return of Tắc and other Tây Ninh leaders in return for supporting “peaceful decolonization” under French leadership within a “French Union.”

Vinh’s trip to Paris and his participation in mounting the 1931 Exposition had important consequences not only for the political future of Caodaism, but also for its visual presentation. Spectacle played an important role in developing indirect rule, as many scholars have argued (Apter 2002; Mitchell 1991; Wright 1991), but most of them have looked only at the European end of this equation, arguing that exhibits of Egypt, Africa and Asia came to be seen as more real and more authentic than the people themselves: “This inversion of simulacrum and original—a kind of commodity fetish writ large—characterizes the imperial ontology of the world-as-exhibition, in which the framing devices of models and plans become political realities with perceived truth-effects” (Apter 2002: 585). An imperial image of Indochina would be created, abstracted and idealized from its local context and would eventually attain greater reality as a representation than the people of Vietnam and Cambodia who it brought into view.

This Foucauldian take on imperial spectacle in the metropole neglects the agency of both the Indochinese students in Paris who demonstrated against the racialized hierarchy expressed in the “evolutionary” progression from Africa to Asia and then to Europe (Norindr 1996) and of people like Vinh who tried to use “Orientalism” against empire. At the same time that he helped construct a replica of Angkor Wat, reproduced with incredible craftsmanship by Indochinese artisans, he used the “mystique” of Asian spirituality strategically to gain support for a religious movement deeply infused with nationalist sentiments.

Two million people converted to Caodaism before World War II, including a number of wealthy landlords, high-ranking civil servants and the “native” wives of European businessmen. (The first Caodai female cardinal, “Madame Mounnier,” was the widow of a rich Swiss jeweler). Phạm Công Tắc, a clerk in the custom’s office who lost six of his eight children to disease and malnutrition when he worked for the French in Saigon, was eventually able to command substantial resources. All the labor on the cathedral was provided as a form of “religious

service” (*công quã*) by Cao daists, with materials donated by the Vietnamese owners of nearby rubber plantations. A splendid sacred city was built in a remote province and became a magnet for new settlers and an eclectic, hybrid architecture emerged that inverted the relation between the original and the copy: By taking on the external form of a Catholic basilica, these Vietnamese religious leaders appropriated the powerful mystique of the colonial mission, but filled it with Asian content.

Returning now to Ferry’s second point—the “ransacking,” or “illegal copying” of other religions—it is useful to ponder the relationship between copy and original along the axis of the colony and the metropole. The Hanoi Opera House is a smaller “copy” of the one in Paris and the Angkor Wat temple at the 1931 Exposition was a life-size “copy” of the original, produced using plaster casts. French engineers and art historians in Indochina, it would seem, were as obsessed with the idea of replication as Homi Bhaba’s often-cited “almost white but not quite” mimics in the colonies (Bhaba 1994 [1987]). They trained Vietnamese artisans in the Beaux Arts tradition of “copying masterworks” (Taylor 2004) but also felt justified in superimposing a pastiche of exotic details on the outsides of “classic” European structures (Wright 1987: 19). British imperial architects designed a similar set of hybrid structures in India (Tillotson 1998) and even Japan, although technically never a colony, developed its own traditions of “strategic Occidentalism” (Jaffe 2006; Ketelaar 1991; Watanabe 1993).

Colonial authorities admired and endorsed practices of copying religious architecture, but they wanted to be the ones in charge of this process of appropriation and duplication. The octagonal tower and curled gables of the École Française d’Extrême Orient in Hanoi was perceived as a “graceful homage” to Asian heritage, while the figure of Jesus with his bleeding heart sitting below Buddha on the Caodai pediment (beneath an octagonal tower and curled gables) was sacrilege, ridiculous and exceedingly “vulgar.”

There are several different ways in which we can try to understand this process. Saussure argued that “the viewpoint creates the object,” so following this semiological dictum we can appreciate how the French colonial perspective transformed Asian religious buildings and the rituals held within them into spectacles through categorical reframing. Even the imperial citadel at Huế, the seat of a once “divine” kingship, could be copied and reproduced in Paris because colonial conquest had demystified (and dis-empowered) the monarch and turned him into an entertaining “icon of tradition.”

Caodai architecture and ritual could be interpreted as an effort to “re-charge” some of these ritual elements. Competitive examinations, held to choose the mandarins of the imperial bureaucracy (simultaneously priests, magistrates and administrators), were held in Hué until 1915, when they were discontinued by mandate of the French colonial authorities (who had repressed many rebellions led by disgruntled mandarins). A decade after their disappearance, the costume of the Confucian examination candidate reappeared in Caodai rituals, in the peaked hats of candidates for the position of *lễ sanh*, or “student priest.” Caodai scripture describes the universe as a giant “school for spirits,” who must study hard to improve their levels of moral understanding and action. If they fail to do well on the “final examination” of this life, they will be “flunked” by the wheel of karma and required to repeat these lessons in their next life (Trần Quang Vinh 1969: 29). Confucian ideals merge with the strict discipline of a French classroom and scholarly examinations are “celestialized” as tests of spiritual and ethical commitment.

Another way to look at this process is to use Walter Benjamin’s categories of the “cult value” of an object (its “aura”) as opposed to its exchange value. The “cult values” of Vietnam were disrupted by the colonial process, which destroyed the authority of the mandarins and Daoist masters when a new generation was educated in French and Romanized Vietnamese and no longer able to read or appreciate Chinese classics. In their place, a new set of “modern cult values” emerged at the intersection of French schooling and Asian heritage. Victor Hugo had a particular fascination for young Vietnamese poets, since he practiced spiritism and vegetarianism, believed in reincarnation and was told in séance in 1835 that he would be “resurrected” in the twentieth century as part of a new universal religion, uniting Asian spirituality with European technological power (Chambers 1998, 2007). French colonialists saw the Caodai “indigenization” of Victor Hugo as ridiculous, a sly ploy to try to invest their own practices with the authority of a great literary figure. But Caodaists say they venerate Hugo to show their love and admiration of French literature and its democratic ideals, even if *liberté, égalité, fraternité* were not put into practice in colonial policy. Hugo’s placement at the entrance to their temple is not mocking but respectful, even utopian, a gesture towards transcendent values that could link metropole and colony.

Caodai theologians say this “visual theology” is both a teaching device and an instrument of power, a way of acting on themselves and on the world (Đỗ Văn Lý 1989). The Left Eye of God is used as a focus point for mediation

and visualizations and also expresses in condensed form the inversion of European Orientalism that runs throughout Caodai theology. Looking at God through the left eye reclaims the positive, forceful and righteous perspective of Asian wisdom, which encompasses and triumphs over the limited, “right-eyed” perspective of French colonialism (and American imperialism).

Jesus, as the son of Cao Đai, must show filial piety to his father, the Jade Emperor. Caodaists point out that Jesus himself was the “Oriental” colonial subject of a European empire based in Rome. He was arrested and charged with operating as a nationalist agitator (calling himself “The King of the Jews”) and crucified because of his leadership in a struggle for the self-determination of his people. His teachings that the meek shall inherit the earth are truly revolutionary, despite distortions by European missionaries. Caodaists say they use spiritism to go back to the source, to speak directly to the great spiritual masters of the past and receive their teachings without the contamination of imperfect human practitioners. This became deeply disturbing to French colonial officers, who recognized the power of nationalist aspirations and chose to combat them with both surveillance and scorn (Lalauette and Vilmont 1931). Perhaps the most threatening aspect of Asian perspective on universal religion was its claim to incorporate European elements and this was what was condemned as “kitsch.”

Kitsch in American popular culture has been linked to a desire to make various “art” or “cult” objects useful:

What taste shaped by high-art practice fails to allow, however, is the centrality of usefulness in popular visual culture. Usefulness, though, conflicts at the most fundamental level with the traditional definition of aesthetic value. Unlike objects created for “disinterested” aesthetic contemplation, designed to celebrate craft and the history of stylistic refinement, popular iconography is thoroughly “interested,” “engaged,” “functional and extrinsically purposive.” (Morgan 1998: 5)

For an anthropologist, the notion of “useful” art objects is closely linked to the idea of ritual efficacy (Mrázek and Pitelka 2008). In effect, what Greenberg disdainfully referred to as the property of kitsch to “operate by formulas” and produce “vicarious experience and faked sensations” could be rephrased as the property of certain objects and images to produce experiences and sensations which are culturally constructed and interpreted as caused by spiritual agents.

From the standpoint of a cultural relativist, kitsch is “merely what one particular group does not appreciate

in another group's culture" (McDannell 1995: 121). This brings us to the third element of Ferry's comment—the idea of Caodaism as a "Disney fantasy," the product of a child-like imagination. As Robert Solomon noted in his exploration of the links between sentimentality and taste, "Calling a work of art "kitsch" is not just to condemn the glibness of its technique, it is also to question the motives of the artist and the emotional maturity of the audience" (1991: 9). It is argued that kitsch presents images that are predictable, programmed and pre-digested, but in fact it often emerges that arguments against kitsch also share these attributes. The "cheap emotions" or "sentimental responses" that are condemned by the arbiters of "good taste" are generally simply emotions that the observer does not share and may actually find disturbing (because they imply a criticism of his own privilege to evaluate them).

### **Conclusions: Metropole and Colony, Copy and Original**

Caodai architecture exemplified an incantatory nationalism, which tried to summon the image of a state that did not yet exist. Its master planning, its intricate administrative hierarchy showed this new religious movement's ability to create something new, to capture modernity in both its Asian and European aspects—its institutions, forms of knowledge, modes of power and radiant future—by means of its likeness. The copy itself becomes an original, a new model for a new order of being.

Caodaists' imitation of French religious architecture is not strictly speaking a parody of Catholicism—just as the spirit medium who receives messages from Victor Hugo and Jeanne d'Arc does not burlesque French colonialism but tries with extraordinary enthusiasm to possess its powers. The norms and forms of the modernist project are affirmed, but not through parody or ridicule. They are absorbed into a greater project and observed from another perspective. The Holy See is a sacred city, the capital of a new global community, which inverts the hierarchical separations of the colonial world: Its exterior is monumental, Gothic, built in an imposing and largely European style, but its interior is crowded, colorful, intensely Asian, with frolicking dragons breathing smoke from lotus-decked pillars and a seven-headed serpent coiled around the throne of the Head Spirit Medium. The imposing exterior creates a boundary, which serves to mark off a sacred space where Oriental figures are triumphant and Occidental ones are relegated to the entry, not yet inside the sanctuary (the Victor Hugo mural), or placed at in the pantheon at a level reflecting their

relatively junior status (Jesus, depicted fondly, but as the “youngest” of the spiritual leaders, the son of a much older Asian father). In this sense, the Caodai sacred architecture inverts the design principles of Hébrard’s Orientalist museum in Hanoi: Hébrard put Oriental decorations on the outside, but the inside is composed of austere exhibition rooms and libraries in the classic European style.

Perceiving this quality of inversion, Paul Mus (1952) described Caodaism as a *religion de remplacement*, a term sometimes translated as a “religion of substitution,” suggesting a mechanism of compensation (McAlister 1970). Young Vietnamese intellectuals, no longer able to become Confucian scholars, “substitute” a religion born in the educated circles of colonial Saigon. Mus also suggested that Caodaism, with its giant symbol of the Eye, could be an “Asian form of Free-Masonry,” with ties to earlier Chinese secret societies and a similar conspiratorial reputation. Many prominent French colonial officials were Freemasons, but Asians were not accepted into this “secret brotherhood” in Indochina until the 1930s. Seeing Caodaism as a compensation or substitute for the vanished coherence of the “traditional world” still bears, however, a trace of the colonial sneer.

I think a more accurate translation of Mus’s phrase and one that captures the oppositional logic of Caodai iconography, is as a “religion of reversal,” one that imagined a world in which Asian spiritual masters would come to replace Western colonial masters. Caodaism was a religion founded by Vietnamese civil servants trained in French language schools, but still living in Vietnam with their families. Vietnamese students who experienced the greater rupture of study abroad, usually in France, become more thoroughly “Westernized” and most embraced Marxism—communism or Trotskyism (McConnell 1989). Although intensely nationalistic and committed to the revolution, they did not struggle as intensely to reconcile Asian philosophical traditions with European modernity. They accepted the logic of a European dialectic and returned home to claim their rights to their native land in the name of an external ideology. Caodaists, however, wanted be cosmopolitan and “modern” without leaving home and to formulate a passionate patriotism in an idiom still recognizable to their fathers and grandfathers.

Spirit mediums who received detailed instructions on how to build their splendid cathedral from 1926 to 1934 tried not only to articulate this vision in its iconography, but to change the world by giving it a visual, tangible form. Phạm Công Tắc’s 1948 sermons state that “the way of the eye” can be spread by drawing new believers to these splendid palaces and empowering them to dream



larger dreams of nationhood (Tấn 1953). If the colonial “world as staged” (Mitchell 1991) could produce its own “reality-effects,” could not an anti-colonial counter project of large public works and an innovative global synthesis from an Asian perspective also serve not only to bolster the morale of a once downtrodden people but also to convince them of the historical inevitability of their triumph? The daring and “presumptuous” architecture was a visual act of insurrection, an iconographic revolution designed to precede and prepare the way for the political revolution to follow.

Architecture is always read and misread through a cultural lens. Early evaluative descriptions of the Caodai Holy See as “Disney like” or “kitsch” have been crucial to fueling its contemporary tourist appeal and muting its political impact. In contrasting interpretations of Caodai temples by believers and by Western critics, I am not dipping into literary criticism but revealing the cultural templates that have structured the perception of an unfamiliar religion with an exuberant and eclectic visual style. Placing images of Eastern and Western gods in close proximity was seen as a “crime in images,” a form of visual blasphemy, which was at least as serious as the “crime in words” of taking the Lord’s name in vain.

Michael Taussig asked: “Is sacrilege the most potent form of the sacred in modernity?” (1993: 63). His question was presented in relation to surrealist experiments with automatic writing, juxtaposing religious themes with sexuality and violence in deliberately provocative and disturbing images. Extending this idea of sacrilege to the colonial world, it is worth asking whether Caodaists, relegated to the realm of kitsch and peasant politics, were not in fact as deliberately subversive and daring in their new theology as the French literary figures with whom they corresponded and collaborated.

The blending of East and West once perceived as sacrilege has now become commonplace, but since Caodaism was forged in the cauldron of a struggle for independence and divisive Cold War conflicts, it remains stubbornly “Asian” in many aspects (a pronounced hierarchy, demanding ascetic discipline, celibacy at the highest ranks) which have little appeal to contemporary hedonists. Its future may lie more in focusing the long distance nationalism of an exiled people rather than converting large numbers of Westerners. But the contrasting views of its Holy See suggest that the line between sanctity and sacrilege, belief and blasphemy is drawn in the eye of the beholder and is primarily a problem of perspective.

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Seeing Syncretism as Visual Blasphemy:  
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