

CHAPTER 4

Can a Hierarchical Religion Survive without Its Center?

Caodaism, Colonialism, and Exile

Janet Hoskins



The new religion of Caodaism has been described both as a form of “Vietnamese traditionalism” (Blagov 2001) and “hybrid modernity” (Thompson 1937). It has been seen both as conservative and outrageous, nostalgic and futuristic. This paper explores that meddling of different oppositions in a religion which Clifford Geertz has called “*un syncrétisme à l’outrance*”—an excessive, even transgressive blending of piety and blasphemy, respectful obeisance and rebellious expressionism, the old and the new. These apparently contradictory descriptions of Caodaism revolve around its relation to hierarchy, and in particular the ways in which its new teachings have played havoc with the hierarchy of the races in colonial Indochina, the hierarchy of the sexes in East Asian traditions, and the hierarchy of religion and politics in French Indochina, the Republic of South Vietnam, and the postwar Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Since the fall of Saigon in 1975, the exodus of several million Vietnamese has brought Caodaism to the United States, Canada, Australia, and Europe, with the largest congregations in California. Separated from religious centers in Vietnam, which were largely closed down for about twenty years, overseas Caodaists have had to consider how to revise the hierarchies of their faith in a new land, and whether to focus on diasporic virtual communities or evangelizing a global faith of unity.

The new forms of hierarchy which emerged in French Indochina in the 1920s were born in the context of anticolonial, nationalist resistance, which created an alliance between former mandarins trying to restore Vietnam’s cultural heritage and young civil servants interested in poetic experimentation, spiritism, and social revolution. Seeking to go beyond

the limits imposed on them by colonial society, they made contact with Cao Dai, the Supreme Being, who was at the same time the Jade Emperor of Taoist tradition and the father of Jesus. Evoking the new spiritual power of an activist, monotheistic faith that combined Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist teachings, this doctrine was perceived by French colonial officers as profoundly transgressive. In a structural sense, transgression consists of a negation of difference between two hierarchical positions (Valeri 1985: 164). The transgressor of hierarchical taboos does not recognize the distinctions that constitute the society that he is part of, and so endangers the entire social order as it is constituted. Following transgression, the whole society suffers the disaggregating effects of possible undifferentiation.

The first role of the successful transgressor, therefore, is to erect a new hierarchy, but one that inverts certain key positions and reorders the society on his own terms. This is more or less what the founders of Caodaism did, in creating a hierarchically ordered religion which seemed in some ways to present a pastiche of Roman Catholic social organization, with its own Pope, female Cardinals, Bishops and Archbishops, and so on. What was different about this new hierarchy and new pantheon was that, while Jesus and Moses were included, they were hierarchically encompassed by Asian spiritual leaders like Buddha, Confucius, and Lao Tse. And they were led by a spiritual Pope who was the epitome of Chinese literary culture: the Tang dynasty poet Ly Thai, who reestablished Chinese literature after its own period of destruction and chaos in the sixth century C.E.

The birth of Caodaism in 1926 has been interpreted as a response to the cultural dislocations of the colonial encounter, described by the paramount spirit medium Pham Cong Tac as a *bouleversement total* of all prevailing forms of order, a topsy-turvy inversion of all established values. Its rebirth on foreign shores, in communities stretching from California to Montreal, from Sydney to Paris, followed a situation of even greater trauma—loss of the country, massive arrests and internments, and dangerous escapes in boats, which produced almost as many victims as survivors. The challenges that Caodaism first faced in the early twentieth century—healing the wounds of colonialism, restoring the vitality of Vietnamese heritage—were made even more intense by the conditions of refugee resettlement and global dispersal. The hierarchies of the early age of revelations were called into question and rethought in the new world, where members of the overseas community have struggled to achieve consensus.

Caodaism's eclecticism has fascinated many visitors and writers, but it has also attracted an almost unparalleled series of attacks on its credibility and integrity, from an early description by Norman Lewis of its Holy See in Tay Ninh as "the most outrageously vulgar building ever to have been erected with serious intent" (1951: 44) to the recent account by Carsten

Jensen (2001: 220) of the faith as the creation of the “half-educated” and “half integrated” who turn to superstition as opposed to religion. In probing the reasons for the passion behind these attacks, I suggest that they erect a category defined by the intersection of “good taste” and “devout faith,” which is deliberately calibrated to exclude the transgressive mixtures of a cosmopolitan spirituality, particularly when that spirituality is based on an Asian synthesis of religious elements rather than a Western one. While the patronizing attitude of these commentators is presented as a defense of civilized European aesthetics against the “grotesque forms” (Lewis 1951: 44 and Jensen 2001: 221) of those less educated than themselves, in fact these authors betray their own continuing colonial mentalities in a rather raw and unmediated form.

Old Hierarchies and New Ones: Caodai Syncretism

In a séance held on the island of Jersey 29 September 1854, “Death” spoke to Victor Hugo and gave him some excellent publishing advice: “In your Last Will and testament, space out your posthumous works, one every ten years, one every five years . . . Jesus Christ rose from dead only once. You can fill your grave with resurrections. . . . You can have an extraordinary death; you can say while dying, you will awaken me in 1920, you will awaken me in 1940 . . . in 1960 . . . in 1980, you will awaken me in the year 2000” (Chambers 1998: 178–79). The purpose of these reawakenings was to “be able to talk to posterity and tell it unknown things which will have had time to ripen in the grave” (Chambers 1998: 178), so that Hugo’s death itself “would be a formidable rendezvous arranged with the light and a formidable threat launched against the night” (Chambers 1998: 179). Hugo followed this advice, and published fifteen works posthumously, extending his publishing career from 1822 to 1951. Hugo described the spirit séances as “those works willed by me to the twentieth century” (Chambers 1998: 180); “probably the basis of a new religion,” and noted that by the time they appeared, “it will be discovered that my revelation has already been revealed” (Chambers 1998: 180). Transcripts of the séances were not published until 1923, in Gustave Simon’s *Chez Victor Hugo. Les tables tournantes de Jersey* (Paris: Conrad 1923).¹ Hugo also produced a series of ink paintings based on his visions, including one (*Soleil d’Encre*) not published until 1985, which bears an uncanny resemblance to Caodai temple images of the Eye of God.

The new religion called Caodai was announced in a séance in Saigon on Christmas Eve 1925, but visions of the divine eye had—as Hugo predicted—already been revealed to Ngo Minh Chieu, the governor of the

island province of Phu Quoc. God announced to his disciples that this new faith was a syncretic product of a global age of communication:

Formerly people lacked transportation and did not know each other. So I founded five branches of the Great Way-Confucianism, ancestor worship, the worship of saints, immortals and Buddhas, each based on the customs of its respective race. But people do not live in harmony because of religious differences, so I have now come to unite all religions back into one, restoring their primordial unity (séance in January 1926, Bui and Beck 2000: 14).

This new religion emerged as a response to the crisis of modernity and particularly of literacy—the Supreme Being made his first appearance as the first three letters of the Romanized Vietnamese alphabet (a á ae). It was born, as it has been argued, as nationalism was also born, in the context of the new possibilities opened up by print capitalism (Anderson 1983), and it is expanding now through an online network, where the divergent branches and orthodoxies are best identified by their Web sites.

Caodaists worship a pantheon of nine deities, beginning with the Left Eye of God, whose radiant light shines out from the top of every one its temples and cathedrals. Below that stands Buddha, flanked by Lao Tse on his right and Confucius on his left, then Li Tai Pe (the famous Chinese poet from the Tang Dynasty), flanked by the female Bodhisattva Quan Am, and the terrifying red faced warrior Quan Cong, followed by Jesus Christ on the third level showing his bleeding heart, and Khuong Thai Cong on the fourth level, representing East Asian traditions of venerating heroes, spirits, and ancestors.

The saints of Caodaism—who famously include figures like Sun Yat-Sen, Mohandas Gandhi, Vladimir Lenin, Joan of Arc, Shakespeare, Descartes, La Fontaine, and Louis Pasteur—are not the products of a bureaucratic canonization process as in the Catholic Church, but are instead the spirits of great men and women who chose to reveal themselves to Caodai spirit mediums and engage in a conversation with sages of all ages about the proper direction that the new religion should take. The main scriptures of Caodaism—its sutras or sacred texts—are derived from 169 spirit messages (selected from many thousands of others) received by Tay Ninh mediums from Christmas Eve 1925 until 1935, and these spirit messages instructed the original twelve disciples on how to build their churches and cathedrals, which prayers and offerings to make, and how to lead a religious movement which should eventually establish peace and harmony between all peoples, races, and religions. Victor Hugo is, among all these saints and sages—the vast majority of them Asian—the spiritual head of the overseas mission, and his spirit is thus particularly important to those missionaries who are now trying to spread the faith in the New

World. They are all, in the broadest sense, the “spiritual sons of Victor Hugo,” and also his students in the great “school for spirits” that Victor Hugo described in séances in 1929 and 1930.

Vietnam went through rapid linguistic transformations at the beginning of the period of French domination, characterized by a historicist feeling of living in totally novel times after a thousand years of a deliberately traditional society, which was perceived as remaining relatively unchanged. The effect of French language schooling was to create a Eurocentric cosmopolitanism: “Within a single generation not only were the most educated Vietnamese unable to read Chinese or Japanese, but they were incapable of reading anything that any Vietnamese had written during the previous two millennia. . . . Intellectually ambitious members of the interwar elite were left with little choice but to immerse themselves in the literary traditions of France and its European neighbors” (Zinoman 2002: 11). The reliability of language in general came into question, as did the unstable relationship between knowledge and power.

Caodaism appealed to a new generation educated in French but still loyal to elements of Vietnamese tradition. Converts during the first few decades of its existence were drawn to it because it was a religion where they could find a spiritual home. One man who converted to the religion in mid life remembered its appeal this way:

When I was young, I was on a quest to find the right faith. My family was Buddhist and worshipped ancestors, but they did not have much to say about the modern world. I went to a Catholic boarding school, and my French teachers wanted me to convert. But they taught me that our ancestors were really evil spirits. I could not accept that, I wanted something more inclusive. The Christians say they have a universal faith, but it seemed to exclude Asian traditions and to teach feudal values. Buddhism has idealistic values, but it did not help people in the time of French colonialism. When I found Caodaism, it was like coming home: The rituals and altars were familiar, but the message was more universal. It was a way to worship one God, but to see him as the father of all. . . . Kipling said, “East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet.” In Caodaism, we are proving that he was wrong.

Many of the Vietnamese civil servants who founded Caodai were graduates of the finest *lycée* in the colony (Chasseloup Laubat), and held stable, responsible jobs as in the offices of taxation, public works, or the railroads. But “in relation to their mostly French superiors, they were no more than simple servants. The democracy, equality, fraternity and liberty they had been taught as vague notions on their school benches were simply dead words in a textbook. Living estranged from the colonial community and separated from the mass of their own compatriots who looked at them with suspicion and distrust, they suffered from the moral solitude of a subaltern.

Their life, at a certain moment, seemed blocked to them. Those who had natural poetic gifts had recourse to the imaginative escapism of words, often in exchanges of verses at evening meetings where young people of both sexes gathered to celebrate the lyric muse.” (Tran Thu Dung 1996: 40, translation mine).

These young intellectuals were also reading the work of European spiritualists like Flammarion and Alain Kardec. Kardec’s *Le Livre des Esprits*, first published in 1857, was particularly influential in establishing a new technology for contacting the invisible world. Table turning (the method Victor Hugo used on the island of Jersey) was supplemented by the beaked basket. Kardec received spirit messages telling him to fit a pencil to a small basket. “This basket, placed on a sheet of paper, was then to be set in motion by the same invisible force that moved the tables. The pencil would trace letters that formed words, sentences, and entire discourses on philosophy, ethics, metaphysics, and psychology, writing as quickly as the human hand” (Kardec [1860] 2002: 8). In Saigon, the beaked basket was known as the “greater tool” (*grand appareil*), while another small board with the letters of the alphabet on it (called a *planchette*) was the “smaller tool” (*petit appareil*). On 3 January 1926, God instructed his disciples in Saigon about the method, which had also been used by Taoist occultists of the Tang dynasty period in China (Smith 1970, part 3: 20):

The spirit is your second body. It is very difficult for the spirit of a human being to transcend the physical body. The spirits of Saints, Immortals, and Buddhas are very marvelous and immortal. The spirit of an enlightened person may transcend the body and even travel the universe. Only the spirit may approach Me. When the basket with beak is used in spiritism, if the person is unconscious, the spirit may then leave the physical body, hear My instructions, and have the body transcribe the messages. If the interpreter’s reading is incorrect, the medium’s spirit will not agree with the interpretation. They will be obliged to write again. In the other form of spiritual contact known as automatic writing, or inspired writing, I will come to you and make your spirit unstable for a while. During that time, your spirit will be able to listen to Me. Your hand will obey and write. In this form of spiritual contact, I cooperate with you so that you can reach Universal Truths.

Caodaists were aware of intersections between ancient Chinese spiritist techniques and the modern vogue for table turning in France. For them, Victor Hugo’s séance transcripts provided a “magic mirror in which Oriental readers met the political and religious thoughts of Buddhism and Taoism” (Tran Thu Dung 1996: 190). It was shock of recognition—seeing notions of reincarnation and communication between the living and the dead being embraced by a great French intellectual—that proved exciting and inspiring. Since Caodai was from its conception a religion with global aspirations,

the selection of Hugo was also strategic: he embodied the sweeping oceanic vision of French romanticism, and by adding the exotic appeal of the colonies, created a combination that was to fascinate—although also at times to repel—a great many people who visited Caodai temples and cathedrals. The reaction of Westerners was mixed. French authorities kept a close eye on the new religion, afraid that it could become the basis for a form of “cultural nationalism,” which would fuel anticolonialist revolt. Some Western observers, like the American Virginia Thompson, called it “the one constructive indigenous religious movement among the Annamites” (Thompson 1937: 475). She admired the tolerance preached by the new religious leaders and the “Gandhiesque flavor about creating a community which is economically self-reliant” (Thompson 1937: 474), as the religious complex at Tay Ninh came to be surrounded by hospitals, schools, printing presses, and weaving centers all identified with the new religion. She described its character as eclectic—“a compromise between old and new, a reconciliation of Eastern and Western concepts” (Thompson 1937: 474).

The new religion also received support from French Free Masons, who recognized a kinship between Masonic ideas of universal brotherhood and even their emblem of the all seeing eye and Caodai practices. Free Masons and Jews were targeted for persecution by the Vichy government and its colonial annexes, so they shared the same enemies.² Caodai is worshipped under the sign of the left eye of God, while Free Masons—and Americans who enshrine the eye of Providence on that most sacred of objects, the one dollar bill—are said to worship the right eye of God. The left eye is identified with the heart, morality, and the Orient, while the right eye is by opposition allied with the brain, science, and the Occident. In the Sino-Vietnamese tradition, the left is the side of yang (*duong*), the east, the sunrise, and positive, male energy, while the right is the side of yin (*am*), the west, the sunset, and negative, female energy. This is an inversion of the Indo-European associations we are most familiar with, but appears to be a consistent feature of Taoist thought in East Asia.

Caodaism shares with Free Masonry the idea of a fraternity where all secular ranks are suspended, even if there is also a separate system of religious ranks. The lure of a spiritual brotherhood which transcends race, gender, and class was crucial to attracting over a million converts in the first decade of the religion’s existence. In this way, the religion destabilized existing hierarchies and brought people of opposing classes—landlords and peasants, illiterates and intellectuals—into the same moral universe.

Among Caodaists, we call each other brother and sister. We have ranks, but we do not address anyone except God as “Your Excellency.” Even the Pope is simply the eldest brother. I have been called “Your Excellency” in my civil life,³ but among my co-religionists I am just the elder brother. When I call

someone my elder brother, I have a duty to respect him. When I call someone my younger brother, I have a duty to help him. Every brother has to go through a process of self-correction before he can serve the religion. You must convert yourself first before you convert others (Do Van Ly, interviewed 3 April 2004).

Reversing the Hierarchy of Race in Colonial Indochina

Race was a significant category in Caodai religious teachings because of the argument that, since God had chosen to reveal his message of the unity of all religions in Vietnam, the Vietnamese people (*dân tộc người Việt*) were the “chosen people” who had a spiritual mission to show the world the shared origins of all faith. In early messages, there was some discussion of both the “French race” and the “Vietnamese race” being selected to reveal this message, but from 1940 onwards it became increasingly clear that, since the French had not responded to this message, it was the Vietnamese alone who would incorporate Western prophets and messiahs into the more encompassing vision of Buddhism and Taoism.

Through the spiritual agency of Victor Hugo, Cadoists presented a moral critique of colonialism. They argued that the only way to escape the hypocrisy of a colonial government, which taught them the value of “*liberté, égalité, fraternité*” but failed to deliver on these values in practice, was to speak directly to one of the great Frenchmen of the nineteenth century. While some commentators have suggested that Victor Hugo was selected as a sly propaganda tool,⁴ reading the messages themselves reveals that a more complex process was at work: Hugo presents himself as schoolmaster lecturing, not only the Vietnamese but also the French, on the ethics of their behavior. His most quoted poem is this one:

L'univers est donc une école pour les esprits	The universe is a school for spirits
Qui la fréquentent pour être encore plus érudits	Who attend to become more erudite
Ceux qui font souvent l'école buissonnière	Those who cut their lessons to play hooky
Doivent doubler leurs années et reprendre leurs matières.	Must repeat a grade taking each subject again
Toutes les âmes espèrent lire ce livre éternel	All the souls hope to read the book of eternity
Qui contient le secret à se faire immortel.	Containing the secret of immortality.

(Séance night of 21–22 April 1930, 11 o'clock, in Tran Thu Dung 1996: 275.)

The metaphor of life as a great school, even—as Tran Quang Vinh argued in a famous speech in 1945—a graduate school of the highest spiritual wisdom—is particularly poignant when we recall that it was used to address a generation of Vietnamese students taught exclusively by French professors, who offered lessons to their native charges by drawing on the great works of French literature. In effect, spirit mediumship was utilized to cut out these professors as the middlemen, and to show that great literary figures can speak for themselves—and would, in fact, speak out against the inequities of colonialism if they could be summoned directly. This was the students quite literally turning the tables on their professors, and applying the “lessons” of French literature to the daily life of French Indochina.

The critical message is even clearer in a spirit message received in December 1931:

Nous sommes en Indochine sous le pouvoir des potentats	We in Indochina are under the tyranny of potentates
Méfions-nous qu'au regard des lois	Watch out that in the eyes of the law
L'on ne nous traite de forçats	We may be treated as convicts
Je ne parle pas de la foi	I do not speak of faith
Le gouvernement colonial s'abaisse	The colonial government loses its dignity
Sous la férule catholique	Under its dependence on the Catholics
Notre nouvelle religion se laisse	Our new religion is becoming
Corrompre par des procès souvent publics	Corrupted by the often public trials
Des droits de liberté	Of the rights to freedom of conscience
De conscience, tant de fois annoncés.	So often announced
Par la France Humanitaire	By a Humanitarian France
De par le monde qu'elle prétend assez chers.	To a world that pretends to cherish them.
Fils d'une telle nation,	As a son of that nation, which I love,
Que j'aime, quoique je n'y compte que pour une vie.	Although perhaps only for one lifetime
J'ai pu connaître vraiment à fond	I have been able to know deeply
Comme est son idéal trahi.	How her ideals have been betrayed.

(Séance at midnight 30 December 1931, at the home of Thai Tho Thanh, in the presence of Pope Le Van Trung and Tran Quang Vinh.)

Hugo is “indigenized” as a schoolmaster and father figure, taking the paternalistic stereotypes of colonial rhetoric and giving them a new twist, in which the Vietnamese sons of the great French literary figure emerge as the true champions of his prophetic ideas of humanism and emancipation, while his European descendants are criticized for their hypocrisy. This séance—one of the most quoted passages of the Caodai scriptures or sutras—was received by the famous spirit medium Pham Cong Tac and recorded by Tran Quang Vinh, the reincarnation of Hugo’s son François. The two of them were to remain two of the most celebrated, charismatic, and controversial figures in the religion. Tac, baptized as a Roman Catholic before he was called by spiritism to Caodai, became the most prominent spiritual leader of the faith, its Master of Mysticism and Supreme Head of the College of Mediums, and is often misidentified in English language histories as its Pope.⁵ Tran Quang Vinh, in contrast, became a temporal and even military leader, who came to epitomize the movement’s anticommunist activism.

Vinh began his career as the general secretary of the Musée Albert Sarraut, the museum of Cambodian arts that tangled with André Malraux in his scams to sneak Cambodian antiquities out of the country. Vinh was sent to Paris in 1931 to attend the *Exposition Coloniale de Vincennes*, where he represented the protectorate of Cambodia. Secretly, spirit séances before his departure revealed that his official French mission was a cover for the more important spiritual mission given to him by God, which was to spread the new religion to metropolitan France. In Paris, he converted the French philosopher and novelist Gabriel Gobron and his wife Marguerite. Gabriel Gobron later published a book on the history and philosophy of Caodaism, and Marguerite a photographic essay on its rituals and costumes (G. Gobron 1947; M. Gobron 1949).

One Frenchman, M. Latapie, was appointed in spirit séances to the position of bishop in the overseas mission, and another, Paul Monet, the prominent critic of colonial exploitation, was asked to be a delegate to the Universal Congress of Religions.⁶ Several French people were attracted to the new faith and attended séances, but the movement was also heavily scrutinized by the Sureté police. In the early 1930s, the colonial government accused Caodaists of mixing religion and nationalist politics. The Interim Pope Le Van Trung was imprisoned in 1933 for fiscal irregularities which he perceived as persecution of the religion. He reacted by angrily turning in the ceremonial ribbons of the *Legion d’Honneur* medal he had received a decade earlier as a prominent political figure in the French colonial regime. He was released, but soon fell ill and died.

Divisions within Caodaism appeared at the time of the death of Pope Le Van Trung. On 20 November 1934, Caodaists at Ben Tré voted to establish a “reformed” branch under the leadership of Cardinal Nguyen Ngoc Tuong. The election was held when Le Van Trung was known to be ailing, but in fact it coincided exactly with the day of his “disincarnation.” Members of the Holy See saw this as an extreme sign of disrespect, while others interpreted it as a sign that the succession was legitimate. But when Cardinal Tuong came to the Holy See to attend the funeral of the first Pope, he was not allowed to enter. Pham Cong Tac presided at a séance where the spirit of Victor Hugo appeared and supported these actions. Refusing to believe that these and other messages were legitimate, Tuong and his followers in the Ben Tré group renounced spiritism completely, arguing that it only served to feed “egotism, dissidence, and sectarianism” (Tran Thu Dung 1996: 236). None of the séances since July 1927 were recognized, and even those dignitaries who had once conversed with the spirit of Victor Hugo now refused to recognize him as a saint or the head of the foreign mission. While Tay Ninh continued to commemorate Hugo’s death each May 22 with an annual festival in his honor, no such event appears on the sacred calendar of the Ben Tré group, which was then and remains the second largest Caodai congregation (Blagov 2001: 169).

Tay Ninh never had another Interim Pope, but Pham Cong Tac received spirit messages saying that the religion could continue under the guidance of its Spiritual Pope (*giao tong vo vi*) Ly Thai Bach, who was in direct communication with Tac. Caodaists in other denominations criticized this move, arguing that Tac took over both the executive and legislative functions of the faith, and was in effect the Acting Pope, a position that he should not assume while still serving as the Ho Phap or Master of Mysticism and Guardian of Religious Law. By 1940, there were three rival Popes: at Ben Tre (Ban Chinh Dao), Tiên Thiên (nearby on the Mekong Delta, with its own spiritist traditions) and Minh Chon Ly (at My Tho), and the religion appeared to take on the character of competing revitalization movements led by charismatic leaders whose spiritual differences could not be reconciled.

In 1941, the Pétainist French colonial government accused the Tay Ninh mediums, and Pham Cong Tac in particular, of being pro-Japanese, since he had received spirit messages which government agents interpreted as prophesying the eventual triumph of the Japanese in Indochina. The French army invaded the Holy See at Tay Ninh and arrested Pham Cong Tac, exiling him and five other members of the college of spirit mediums to Madagascar.

Vinh escaped arrest at the time since he was working for the French colonial government in Phnom Penh. Guided by a spirit séance that told him it was time to fight back, he approached the Japanese, who offered him support and military training to form the Caodai Army. Caodai forces helped the Japanese in the March 1945 coup that captured French soldiers and police, and declared Vietnam an independent state under emperor Bao Dai. When the Japanese were defeated in August and Ho Chi Minh issued another declaration of independence in Hanoi in September, most Caodaists rejoiced. The Caodai army, allied with the separate militia of the Buddhist reformists Hoa Hao, controlled more of southern Vietnam than any other force, including the Viet Minh, and seemed poised to share power in a new government of national unity (Fall 1955: 239). But since the religious leaders were still in exile, there was no consensus. Military leaders appointed by the new government in Hanoi did not want to share power, and Viet Minh political prisoners released from French prisons attacked Caodai communities, killing not only soldiers but also civilians. A monument erected in Quang Ngai in 1956 commemorates the deaths of 2,791 Caodai priests, women, and children in a series of killings beginning in August 1945, and this date is still commemorated in religious ceremonies mourning “Caodaists martyred for their religion.”

Alienated from their former comrades in arms by these attacks, Caodaists were then courted again by the French, who realized that if they were to return to reconquer Indochina, they would need at least some indigenous collaborators. On 6 June 1946, Tran Quang Vinh was captured by French forces, tortured, and forced to agree to a truce. In return for his promise not to attack the French army, he was able to negotiate for the return of Pham Cong Tac and the other exiled leaders from Madagascar. The French General Latour announced dramatically that the Caodaists had “rallied to the national cause,” and a military convention was signed with the French High Command in which Caodaists promised “loyal collaboration” with the French (Dutton 1970: 19). The French benefited immensely from this agreement, since it gave them “control over wide areas of south Vietnam which they could never have hoped to conquer militarily” (Fall 1955: 297), while the Viet Minh suffered a setback because of their brutality in dealing harshly with Caodaists and other nationalist groups who would normally have been their allies.

When Pham Cong Tac returned from exile, he accepted the political conditions which had made this possible, and stated that a continued French presence might be “necessary” for a few more years. Some leaders of dissident denominations in My Tho and Ben Tre remained in French

prisons, but the mother church in Tay Ninh functioned openly, and the Holy See was reopened as well as thousands of temples in Vietnam and Cambodia (Blagov 2001: 94). Caodai soldiers saw themselves as a defensive force, primarily concerned with protecting their own religious centers, but they served as a home guard throughout the south, allowing the French to concentrate on waging war against Ho Chi Minh's armies in the north.

The Viet Minh saw this alliance as a betrayal and continued to kill Caodai dignitaries and their followers from 1945 to 1954, in a slaughter that Caodai historians estimate at 10,000 people. From 1948–49 Vinh was Minister of Defense of South Vietnam, commanding not only the Caodai army but also the militias of the Buddhist revivalists Hoa Hao and the Saigon based Binh Xuyen. In 1951, after conflicts over who would lead Caodai forces, he was kidnapped by the renegade General Thé and held hostage at Black Lady Mountain. After he was freed (and General Thé was assassinated), Vinh spent ten years in France recovering from this ordeal, and writing a history of Caodaiism (published posthumously as Tran Quang Vinh 1997).

In 1953–54, Pham Cong Tac gave a series of press conferences praising both Bao Dai and Ho Chi Minh and calling for national union. When the French were defeated at Diem Bien Phu in 1954, he called for a reconciliation of the southern nationalists with the northern communists. Tac believed that his religion of unity would provide the ideal setting for negotiations to bring Vietnam's different political groups together, and he hoped for French and American backing for this to proceed. The U.S.-backed Ngo Dinh Diem regime, however, moved to consolidate all armed forces into the South Vietnamese Army. In October 1955, Diem ordered Caodai General Commander Phuong to invade the Holy See and strip Pham Cong Tac of all his temporal powers. Three hundred of the Tay Ninh papal guardsmen were disarmed, and Tac became a virtual prisoner of his own troops (Blagov 2001: 147). Tac's daughters and a number of other religious leaders were arrested, but he himself managed to slip away. He made contact with his followers several weeks later from Phnom Penh, and lived out the last three years of his life in exile in Cambodia. Tac's body was placed in an elaborate tomb in Phnom Penh, protected by a special mandate from his former classmate King Sihanouk, who allowed him to rest in Cambodia until the day that Vietnam would be "unified, peaceful and neutral."

His associate, Vinh, returned to Vietnam in 1964, reassumed his religious duties, and served as Vice President of the Chief Council of national government in 1965 and Vice President of the Legislative Council in 1965.⁷ During this period he continued to receive spirit messages from

Victor Hugo, who provided guidance to his spiritual son and advised the Caodaist hierarchy on missionary activities. After the fall of Saigon, Vinh, then 77, was imprisoned in a communist “reeducation” camp. His relatives were told that he died in detention in January 1977, but other sources claimed he was executed in September 1975 (Blagov 2001: 152).

Unsettling Hierarchies of Gender in Traditional Asia

Although Caodaists have become famous for being innovative in having female Cardinals and religious dignitaries, the emphasis on liberation has been more focused on national and religious goals than on sexual equality. The tensions between hierarchy and egalitarianism were evident from the syncretistic beginnings of this religious movement. Its Confucian elements celebrated the literary achievements of an elite, its Taoist occult practices focused more on the relation of man to nature rather than to society, and its esoteric tradition was primarily Buddhist in inspiration. What was novel about Caodaism, however, was that in contrast to all three of Vietnam’s “great teachings,” it fostered a more personal and direct contact with God. While Confucianism can be described as an ethical system, Taoism as a metaphysical one, and Buddhism as a philosophy of self realization, what Caodai added to the mix was a more personal relationship to a monotheistic deity. Caodai spirit mediums have direct conversations with God and the various saints, and the goal of Caodai meditation exercises was to study directly from the spiritual entities themselves. The “personal relationship with Jesus” which is advocated by some Protestant groups was expanded to include a much wider Asian pantheon of spirits, and a more cosmopolitan spirituality.

The direct and activist form of religious communication influenced the new religion’s orientation to the world and to sexual politics. Both men and women have served as spirit mediums, and young female mediums emerged as particularly important in the 1960s and 1970s in Saigon during the American war. Caodaism is unusual in world religions in seeking parity—equal numbers of male and female dignitaries at religious ceremonies—and in allowing women to hold high ranking positions. Women’s greater longevity and many years of service in the religion (uninterrupted by military service or prison camp) have often made them the only guardians of Caodai temples during stressful times. As a result, membership in some temples—like the one in Hanoi—has been “feminized,” with many more women attending ceremonies than men, perhaps because they are less likely to suffer the social censure that being religious may bring to professionals and civil servants in Vietnam today.

The *Tan Luan* or New Code of Conduct is Confucian in its prescriptions for women to honor their fathers, husbands, and sons, and also in its tolerance for divorce, or a husband's taking a second wife if his wife has not produced a male descendant. Veneration of the Mother Goddess and of female saints and deities like Quan Am, Joan of Arc, and the Virgin Mary appeal to followers of feminist spirituality, but rules pertaining to marriage, divorce, and the family have seemed to reassert traditional sex roles rather than displacing them. Divorce can be requested by a woman only in cases of desertion, offending the inlaws, or infertility, but in practice many allowances have been made for different cultural contexts. The highest ranking Caodai dignitary at a 2004 retreat in San Martin, California was a female archbishop Ngoc Tuyet Tien, and temple Thien Ly Buu Toa was founded by her and the female spirit medium Bach Dien Hoa as one of the earliest Caodai temples in the United States, and the only one to receive and distribute spirit messages since 1977.

Women are active in California temples in fundraising, organizing youth groups, hosting religious ceremonies with good food, and attending international conferences. Caodai's innovation in defining a new way to "live a religious life" (*song tu*), not only in the monastery but also in the family home, has certainly opened doorways to greater female participation in religious leadership than was the norm in Buddhism or Roman Catholicism.

Grappling with Hierarchies of Religion and Politics in California

Two million Vietnamese now make America their home, and after initial sponsorship by Church groups throughout the United States (and some heavily pressured baptisms), the Caodai community has reconstituted itself in California, alongside other Vietnamese congregations. Caodai's earlier goals of healing the wounds of colonialism and bringing the "gods of Asia" into dialogue with the "gods of Europe" have been rearticulated into current projects of preserving Vietnamese heritage in the United States and offering a spiritual alternative to Americans whose lives were marked by the Vietnam War. Spirit messages from 1926 predicted that "people from the north and from the south" would travel overseas at the time that Vietnam was reunified, and many Caodaists have thus seen the exodus as predestined, a part of God's plan to place disciples of the new religion all over the world, where they would learn foreign languages and be able to spread the faith to new audiences.

Refugees who fled Vietnam after 1975 suffered the loss of their country in military defeat, and then the dangers of traveling by boat, fighting off pirates, and the lack of food or water. Over a million people who remained in the country were arrested and interned in reeducation camps, where they served indefinite terms of many years at hard labor. More than a thousand Caodai religious leaders were interned in specialized camps, but it was younger men who had served the South Vietnamese government in military or civilian positions who often became more committed to religious ideals as a result of this experience. Just as the colonial prison formed an earlier generation of revolutionaries, the communist reeducation camp produced prisoners of conscience who found solace in meditation, religious discipline, and secret study groups to counter their forced indoctrination. In 1985, the Humanitarian Transfer Act allowed many former prisoners to emigrate to the United States, and many of them came to occupy positions of leadership in American Caodai temples.

Trauma and dislocation initially produced a fragile consensus that allowed Caodaism to be reconstituted on American soil without attention to sectarian divisions, focusing instead on the shared message of peace, harmony, and love that has always been the basis of the new religion's teachings. Do Van Ly, the most senior Caodai leader in California, formed a congregation in Los Angeles in 1979–1990 which was based on a unified vision of the faith and not affiliated with any specific branch. But the history of Caodaism in Vietnam and its troubled relationship to hierarchy later made this unity in exile more problematic.

Hierarchy and Diversity: Sectarian Divisions and Political Trials

Caodaism in Vietnam is divided into about a dozen different denominations, each with its own set of spirit messages or scriptures. In Caodai oral tradition, the twelve original disciples were eventually scattered among twelve separate “churches,” although the historical evidence suggests a more fitful sequence of defections and returns, including twenty-three separate branches (Do Van Ly 1989), with ten specific branches or *Phái* now officially recognized by the government. Tay Ninh, the “mother church” has 500 out of 1,300 temples, and retains about half of all those Vietnamese citizens who identify themselves on census forms as Caodai (about 2.5 million). It is often referred to as the “Vatican” of Caodaism, or its “Rome,” in contrast to the esoteric branch of the founder, Chiêu Minh, which is sometimes called the “Bethlehem” of the religion, or the center of early prophecies and apocalyptic traditions. Tiên Thiên, a third branch,

considers itself the “Jerusalem.” The new ecumenical teaching organization, the Institute of Caodai Teachings (Co Quan Pho Thong Giao Ly), draws its membership mainly from urban elites, and has been described as the “Jesuit” branch of the religion and its intellectual center.

The Institute was founded in Saigon in 1964 by Tran Van Que, in response to a spirit message to found a center focusing on the shared doctrines and meditation techniques of the religion, rather than on rank, ritual, or recruitment efforts. Not affiliated with any specific Holy See, the Saigon Institute offers courses to students and residents, drawing in many educated professionals. Its idealistic vision of how the shared teachings could overcome sectarian differences brought in many new members, and created an intellectual infrastructure, which was to have a great impact on overseas communities. Institute leaders sponsored spirit séances in a non-denominational format, and the popularity of these séances reinvigorated Caodai doctrine, which had seemed to stagnate a bit after the death of the inspirational but divisive Pham Cong Tac.

Do Van Ly received a spirit message calling him to join the Institute after serving as the Ambassador to the United States and head of diplomatic missions to India and Indonesia. Renouncing politics to travel throughout South Vietnam opening up new temples in an increasingly war torn country, he saw Caodaism as a way to liberate the Vietnamese people from the legacy of colonialism and forge a new national consensus based on shared spiritual values. Returning to Vietnam after many years of schooling and diplomatic service overseas, he helped organize a more cerebral, reflective religious practice, which incorporated the cosmopolitan orientation of a new generation of city dwellers. While he and many of the young men and women who took classes at the Institute escaped in 1975, a core of members remained in Saigon, and the Institute remained open after the fall of Saigon.

The Holy Sees in Tay Ninh, Ben Tre, My Tho, and Soc Trai did not fare as well: Communist troops seized forty out of the forty-six buildings in Tay Ninh, arrested 1,291 Caodai religious leaders, killed thirty-nine of them in clashes, and sentenced nine to death (Blagov 2001). Tay Ninh Caodaists in the United States have tried to maintain a state of purity in exile by usually refusing to collaborate with the present communist-appointed management committee and emphasizing ways in which the religion was constrained and paralyzed under communist control. The other Mekong Delta denominations seemed to have made their peace with the new regime in another way, as they now display large portraits and busts of Ho Chi Minh.

The Saigon Institute, in contrast, was led after 1975 by an opposition party leader, Dinh Van De, who decided to work with the new regime to assure that Caodaism would remain a national presence. Noting that

during the many years of civil war, Caodaists were found on both sides of the ideological struggle, he explained to me in 2004 that this political division ultimately helped the faith to survive: “The Caodaists who supported the communists have given us some room to move in relation to a regime which opposes all religious organizations. They have helped to create a place for us to place our feet in the new Vietnam, and since 1990 we have been able not only to survive in the shadows but even to come out again on the national stage.”

In the period since 1990, Caodaism—like the famous magical phoenix bird that is one of its favorite religious icons—has raised itself up from the ashes both in Vietnam, where it finally received official recognition in 1997, and in North America, where it is now building new temples and establishing the largest community in exile. But this amazing rebirth has not been without costs: The religion is only allowed to operate in Vietnam under strict government controls that do not permit spirit séances for the promotion of new leaders to the higher ranks. As a result, the leadership appears “decapitated,” with no one over the rank of archbishop currently alive.

In September 2004, the U.S. Department of State designated Vietnam as a “country of particular concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act, for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The most high profile groups lobbying for this designation were Protestant evangelical churches in the highlands, and expatriate members of the banned Unified Buddhist Church, but it was noted that some Caodai leaders had been imprisoned or placed under house arrest. The designation was prompted in part by a new Ordinance on Belief and Religion, passed by the National Assembly on 18 June 2004 in which the government reserved the right to control and oversee religious activities, including the training of clergy, the construction of new temples, public speaking (now defined to include Internet postings), and evangelizing. Religious organizations are encouraged to engage in charity work, but their participation in the public sphere is tightly monitored.

It will be many years before Caodaists in Vietnam can have the same public and even political profile that they had in the 1940s and 1950s, but the resurgence of interest in religion in the Post Reformation Period—combined with the fact that Tay Ninh is now the second largest tourist destination in South Vietnam—have helped Caodaists to renovate their churches, refresh the paint on their brightly colored facades, and gain new adepts among the new generation. In 2005 and 2006, Tran Quang Canh, the son of Tran Quang Vinh, visited Vietnam as the head of the Tay Ninh Overseas Mission, and met with Hanoi government officials to discuss ways to increase religious freedom under the current regime. In November 2006 the body of Pham Cong Tac was brought back to Tay Ninh and Vietnam was dropped from the list of countries of particular concern because of religious freedom.

Diaspora Versus Global Community

The diasporic perspective is strongest among refugee groups who migrated in circumstances of persecution or civil war, and for these very reasons many Vietnamese who came to the United States after years in reeducation camps share some of the political conviction of Holocaust survivors and Cuban exiles. While some, particularly older, members of the Caodai community are most concerned with defending freedom of religion in the homeland, others, many of them now American born, are trying instead to build a larger understanding of the religion in the wider American public.

I use a narrow definition of diaspora developed by Hans von Amesfoot in a discussion of Moluccans in the Netherlands: “A diaspora is a settled community that considers itself to be ‘from elsewhere’ and whose concern and most important goal is the realization of a political ideal in what is seen as the homeland” (Amesfoot 2004: 151). Under this definition, the two most important diasporic communities of Vietnamese Americans are without doubt the “Little Saigon” in Orange County, California, and the “Littler Saigon” of the Bay Area around San Jose. In Orange County, some members of the 135,000 Vietnamese American community have supported special “anti-communist zone” ordinances in the cities of Westminster and Garden Grove, which require prior notice for Vietnamese government delegations to visit and discourage official contacts with Vietnam. They also protested for months in 1999 when a video store displayed a photo of Ho Chi Minh or raised the Vietnamese flag. In January 2004 a State Department sponsored visit by Hanoi officials to Little Saigon was cancelled when Westminster officials refused to ensure their safety.

In the Bay Area, by contrast, San Francisco has had a sister city relationship with Ho Chi Minh City since 1994, and a Vietnam government consulate since 1997. The Bay Area is home to about 100,000 Vietnamese Americans, and since December 2004 it has also established the first direct air service between the United States and Vietnam in nearly 30 years (Moore and Tran 2004: 1). For many years a number of Vietnamese American leaders discouraged contact with Vietnam, including doing business there or even traveling to visit family members, since they saw all contact as offering implicit support to the communist government. In 1993, when the United States normalized diplomatic relations with Vietnam, the number of Vietnamese Americans who returned to visit their homeland increased significantly, and in the first nine months of 2004 about 10,000 people flew to Vietnam from the United States to visit friends and family, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce (Moore and Tran 2004: 1). Vietnamese Americans make up about 10 percent of all foreign tourists to Vietnam, in a rapidly expanding industry that recently topped the million mark.

Among those returning for visits were Caodai religious officers, bringing funds to rebuild the Caodai Sacerdotal Center (Hoi Thanh) in Binh Dinh that was destroyed during the American war. Others have returned to arrange for the shipment of Caodai altars, gongs, and religious icons to California, to give courses at the Caodai Institute in Saigon, and to consult with religious leaders in the homeland.

Hierarchy and the Future of Caodaism

Hierarchy is part of the “Asian traditions” which Caodaism honors, but events over the past half century have made its ranked system of spiritual titles and delegated authority hard to maintain. Scholars have argued that the disciplined hierarchical structure of Caodaism has allowed it to expand and grow over an eighty year period, providing a sense of stability and tradition that many other millenarian new religious movements have not managed to maintain (Werner 1976). But Caodaism has now become a religion where the center cannot speak, and only those on the periphery are allowed to converse with God and the various saints. The tensions between a ranked leadership and a dispersed membership have grown ever more evident as Caodaists have been spread all over the globe, and as refugees forced to adapt to a series of new cultural contexts.

For those Vietnamese Americans who are growing up in the shadow of Disneyland, worshipping the left eye of God may suggest Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom rather than solar energy, lunar calendars, and Oriental morality. Do Van Ly suggests that the future of Vietnam depends on making good use of these contrasts: “We are the two peoples in the world to worship under the sign of the eye. We Vietnamese worship the left eye of God, you Americans worship the right. There is an Arab proverb that says: ‘The two eyes are very close but they cannot see each other.’ This shows how wrong the Arab world can be. My lifelong goal of liberating my people will be achieved when the American educated Vietnamese return to their country to bring them Western democracy with an Eastern ethical orientation.”

This articulation of the “diasporic perspective”⁸ sees Caodaism as a religion in exile whose members are all striving for political changes in the homeland so that they can return. It contrasts with another view—perhaps more common among younger members and those who are American born—of a “global religion reinventing itself in the new world”—in which ties to non-Vietnamese converts become more important, and the religion can receive new revelations on American soil. Dr. Hum Duc Bui, a California physician who has coauthored the only book in English by a Vietnamese Caodaist, *Caodai: Faith of Unity* (2000), describes

his perspective in this way: “Now, Americans are beginning to discover the value of the original esoteric form of CaoDai, with its practices of meditation, vegetarianism and emptying the mind to open the way for conversations with God. In much the same way as Tibetan Buddhism has attracted many Western disciples, CaoDai has begun the process of disseminating its valuable and closely held esoteric information to the West. The first temple to open itself to the influx and acceptance of Westerners is underway in Riverside, California. Its leaders have the desire to relate their teachings in English to Americans (both Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese) so that the first and main message received from the Supreme Being, that we are all One and must reunite under The One Nameless Divinity, can be delivered and that a path of esoteric practice toward that end (reunification of the self with the Supreme Being) may begin” (Bui and Beck 2000: 28–29).

The efforts begun in 2000 to build a more encompassing temple in Riverside were doomed, however, to some disappointment. After a very promising beginning, in which Caodaists of all denominations took part and contributed funds, quarrels began about which specific architectural and liturgical traditions would be followed. Not everyone was willing to go along with a bold new conceptualization of the faith, which seemed to sever ties with precedent and establish its own clergy. Some promised contributions failed to materialize, and the project itself is stalled for the moment, awaiting a greater consensus of American Caodaists.

In 2006, construction began on a Tay Ninh affiliated Caodai temple in Garden Grove, California, in a residential neighborhood close to the business district of “Little Saigon.” Although there was concern about the relationship between an American-built temple and the stagnant hierarchy in Vietnam, the successful example of a new Tay Ninh affiliated temple in Sydney, Australia, was enough to carry fundraising forward. The temple was finished in 2007, and became a landmark for tourists and school groups. While some have wondered how such a great enterprise could be guided without spirit séances from the “Vatican” in Tay Ninh, others have argued persuasively that the temple will be a visual guide to the esoteric teachings of the faith, and should attract converts as well as curious visitors (Biederman 2006: 2).

Spirit séances have also been held in California, although they remain extremely controversial. The Court of Heavenly Reason Temple (Thien Ly Buu Toa) near San Jose has had a female spirit medium since 1977, and she has received hundreds of spirit messages, which they have published as “new volumes of the Caodai Bible” (*Dai Giác Thánh Giáo Pháp*). The first volume had fifty-four messages, including fourteen from Caodai (Ngoc Hoang Thung De, the Supreme Being, also called the Jade Emperor), six

from Jesus Christ, two from Buddha (Thich Ca Mau Ni Phat), two from Quan Cong (Quan Thanh De Quan), one from the Virgin Mary (Duc Me Maria), four from the founder of Caodai Ngo Minh Chieu, two from Ly Thai Bach (the spiritual Pope), one from the Mother Goddess (Dieu Tri Kim Mau), one from Noah of the Old Testament, and one from an American spirit—Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism.

Joseph Smith is appreciated because his revelations from the Angel Moroni are seen as part of a tradition of spiritism that includes Caodai, and Smith's own background as a Free Mason caused him to include many Caodai symbols (like the all-seeing eye, the moon and stars, and so on) on the outside of Mormon temples. It is perhaps significant that several non-Vietnamese Caodaists, like Stephen Stratford and Ngasha Beck, came from Mormon backgrounds, but renounced Mormonism as racist and patriarchal, and have come to find Caodai a more welcoming spiritual home.

On 9 November 2003, a new medium in San Jose, Hue Tanh, received a message stating that, since after 1975 the sacred centers in Vietnam (Hoi Thanh) could not communicate with Caodaists overseas, they should now listen to the direct spiritual guidance of Ly Thai Bach, the Spiritual Pope, and seven of its most important twentieth century leaders (including Pham Cong Tac and the founder Ngo Van Chieu): "We immortals are happy to see you going overseas and carrying the Caodai messages to new people. God created the religion to save the Vietnamese and also all of humanity. His blessings will go to the good and penalties will go to those who oppose God's will. Look at the example of the past and learn from it in order to spread the teachings in the future. When we immortals were alive, we were sometimes separated by divisions, so you should not follow that example but learn to work together more effectively. . . . You need to unify to become the lighthouse of the Western world (*sáng chói ở Tây Phương dế*) so that people can find peace, salvation and happiness."⁹ This call for unity is an effort to transcend the tensions between hierarchy and egalitarianism, between a respect for the authority of religious leaders in the homeland now paralyzed by government restrictions and the leaders of refugee communities who need new messages of spiritual guidance for the new world. It speaks both to the glorification of ancient traditions and the innovations forced by the present moment.

In informal discussions with Caodai leaders in California, several of them noted that over the past thirty years they have tried to learn from the forms of religious organization they saw in the United States: "On the one hand, we see the Catholic Church, which has retained a strict hierarchy, but is plagued by scandals about priestly celibacy, women in the religion, and birth control. On the other hand, we see a great many Protestant churches that divide and form new congregations everyday.

There are new Baptist preachers all over the place, and any one who can get a following can become an evangelist. In many ways, the egalitarian Baptist model seems to work better here” (Kham Bui, interviewed 23 April 2005). Since Caodaism proposed itself initially as an alternative to the racist teachings of French colonial Catholicism, its historical organization was similar to that of the Vatican, but now—on new terrain—the mixture of anarchic individualism and shrewd public relations marketing exemplified by many American churches presents an appealing new form of organization. Denominational differences had already been eclipsed in the organization of Caodai congregations because of low numbers, so the de facto organization of the California community was, in effect, a set of groupings centered on a few charismatic spiritual leaders—not unlike the splintering of the followers of the first disciples in the 1930s.

Caodaism and the Postcolonial Critique of Hierarchy

Caodaism as a new religion created in the colonial context has been represented by its founders as both a force for modern national liberation and the revival of Asian traditions. While it has deliberately violated certain hierarchies, it has done so by creating new ones, and the vicissitudes it has suffered over its eighty years of history have created new forms of organization and collaboration. How does its complex history in Vietnam and California shed light on the controversies over the colonial construction of notions of Asian hierarchy?

Dumont’s *Homo Hierarchicus* (1980) sparked a series of discussions about holism, difference, hierarchy, and race that have remained central to questions of how to interpret what is often called “Asian traditionalism.” Hierarchy is, in Dumont’s sense, not so much an expression of power differences, as of worldview. His famous statement that “to adopt a value is to introduce hierarchy, and a certain consensus of values . . . is indispensable to social life” (1970: 36) was an effort to explain a commitment to unifying values that the modern world has lost, and an effort to use that commitment to differentiate East from West.

Since Caodaism was, from its very beginning, an effort to fuse East and West, it would seem to deny both Dumont’s notion of hierarchy—motivated as it may have been by a peculiar Western form of nostalgia—and the idea that hierarchy is a necessary component of Asian religiosity. Dumont’s hierarchy implies the regular ordering of a phenomenon on a continuous scale “such that the elements of the whole are ranked in relation to the whole” (Dumont 1980: 66). It is thus a ritual hierarchy (and that is why Dumont sees it as “true”), which is dependent upon a state

of mind and is not influenced by secular forces of economics and politics (see Dumont 1980: 19, 34, 66). More recent critics (Appadurai 1986, 1988; Dirks 2001) have argued that hierarchy is not an enduring ideological disposition but instead the “precipitate” of the colonial encounter: “Hierarchy, in the sense of rank or ordered difference, might have been a pervasive feature of Indian history, but hierarchy in the sense used by Dumont and others became a systematic value only under the sign of the colonial modern” (Dirks 2001: 5). Many of the features they identify as characteristic of British colonial rule—shoring up a local aristocracy and using them to sustain a very particular form of indirect rule—were at least as true of the French colonial presence in Indochina, “the pearl of the Orient,” as they were of the British in India, “the jewel in the crown.”

Vietnam differs from India, however, in being a much more homogeneous state, where nationalist forces could draw on three already fused Asian spiritual traditions and marry them to the organization of the Catholic Church, creating a new and more encompassing religious order under a monotheistic God. The Caodai leader Pham Cong Tac was at times compared to India’s Gandhi (Thompson 1937) because of the way he combined religious ideals with a struggle for political independence, but the two countries were divided in very different ways: for India, partition came because of deep divisions between Hindu and Muslim nationalists, while in Vietnam, many religious groups shared nationalist aspirations, but cold war struggles between the United States and China imposed a partition which became an ideologically charged civil war. Caodaism proposed a syncretistic model of ritual unity that argued directly that Vietnamese nationalists could use Jesus’ message of shared humanity and fuse it with Buddhist ideas of equality, Taoist metaphysics, and Confucian universal citizenship. Caodaism spread through a social organization that was both egalitarian (a fraternity of brothers and sisters morally bound to assist one another) and hierarchical (in proposing ranks of religious office, with promotion based on a combination of seniority and spiritual approval). While the Holy Sees which were the sacred centers of each denomination are now cut off from their diasporic disciples, new forms of organization have emerged through the more anarchic structure of the Internet, through which each individual temple remains in contact with others in a virtual community with no clear leader or coordinated system of ranks.

During its initial “age of revelations” (1925–1934), Caodaism was totalizing and hierarchical in a Dumontian sense, in that it sought to encompass all the world’s religions within itself, promoting a single, oceanic vision of shared teachings and spirituality. But it is the differentiating, historicizing aspects of hierarchy in practice, which produced (as Dirks and Appadurai might have predicted) a splintering of this initial

consensus and competing denominations led by charismatic leaders, each of whom claimed his own forms of divine inspiration. In Indochina as in India, colonial governments sought both to domesticate and reproduce local hierarchical structures. Caodai doctrines emerged as a response to the displacements of the colonial modern, and the sense that the country had been “lost” to the French (as many early nationalists argued). The more recent and complete “loss of country” experienced by refugees after 1975 opened up older wounds, and forced a new reevaluation of ways in which Eastern spirituality could be wedded to Western modernism. The educated young men and women of 1925, whom their parents found already “too French,” found themselves with children and grandchildren in California, who seemed to them to be altogether “too American”—and in even more desperate need of traditional moral values.

Caodai’s Critics and Contemporary Neocolonialism

In spite of its lofty ideals of interracial cooperation, Caodaism has been dismissed by many European commentators, who use vivid descriptions of its temples to form the comic relief chapters in travel books on Southeast Asia. There were relatively few historical materials available to visitors in the 1950s, like Norman Lewis and Graham Greene, so they can perhaps be forgiven for siding clearly with French colonial powers and dismissing Caodaists as “no longer naïve and charming but cunning and unreliable” (Greene 1991: 240). Greene in particular had been attracted to the new faith since it combined echoes of Catholicism with Asian spiritual aspirations, but concluded that the Caodaists were bad allies to the doomed French and therefore untrustworthy. Carsten Jensen visited Tay Ninh in the 1990s, shortly after the Great Temple had been allowed to reopen after decades of persecution. He seems to have read little since Greene’s and Lewis’ descriptions half a century before, treating it as “an ersatz religion,” which “provided a standpoint for those who never took a stand on anything, renegades caught between two worlds, their own Vietnamese world, which they considered themselves to have risen above, and that of the French, which they could never hope to attain. . . . Its imagination owed its inspiration to choreography and set design as opposed to theology. It provided its devotees with costumes, symbols and physical rituals; gave them an easy answer to who they were, which they needed, since they no longer belonged either to the East or to the West” (2000: 220–221).

This patronizing condemnation of Caodai’s religious hybridity would seem come straight from the colonial apologists, and includes no mention of the ways in which this religion survived the exodus of over a million

Vietnamese, reeducation camps, and the banning of spiritism, as well as the dissolution of its original constitution. Caodaism has not provided “an easy answer” to modern Vietnamese, but rather a difficult one that has required a lot of sacrifice and suffering to keep its dream of eventual reconciliation alive. Jensen alludes briefly to the many Euro-American “spiritual seekers” who seem to shed partners and philosophies with equal ease, seeking exoticism perhaps as much as wisdom. But he fails to see that Caodaism has shown much greater staying power than many New Age spiritual fashions. After so many years of war, its message of peace and reconciliation has become particularly poignant because it originated in a land torn by violence.

Caodaism is now a transnational religious movement, although there are deep and significant differences between the way it is perceived and lived in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the New Age-influenced communities of California. But it is precisely because of these differences that a study of efforts to revitalize this “faith of unity” is especially important and significant today. Eighty years ago, Caodaism came into being to provide Vietnamese intellectuals in a modernizing world with a form of spiritual and religious activism, using the principles of Buddhism and Taoism in a much more “this worldly” organization. Today, it is being reconceptualized as a way to heal not so much the lingering wounds of colonialism but the continuing inequities of a globalized society. This new vision of bringing the Left Eye of God to the Western world brings an Eastern perspective on universal religion to the land illuminated by the right eye on the dollar bill.

Notes

1. They have now been republished in English in Chambers, *Conversations with Eternity* (1998).
2. A French dissertation on Caodaism in Cambodia (Bernardini 1974) published a photograph of an altar in Phnom Penh erected in 1955 with Victor Hugo on the left, Le Van Trung in the center, and Sun Yat Sen on the right. The temple in Phnom Penh, destroyed once in 1954, and again in 1975 by the Khmer Rouge, was rebuilt in 1990 in Tay Ninh style next to the tomb of Pham Cong Tac, and now features many images of Tac but none of Victor Hugo.
3. The speaker, Do Van Ly, has served as the Vietnamese ambassador to the United States, India, and Indonesia; so as an ambassador he was addressed in Vietnamese as Duc Dai Su, “Your Excellency the Ambassador,” but he did not use this title when he was with members of his religious brotherhood. He argues that he treats his coreligionists as equals, although in his diplomatic work he had to respect hierarchical protocols.

4. “But one cannot dismiss the possibility that the main reason why early Caodaists mentioned Hugo so frequently in talking with Europeans was a desire to impress them with their high degree of loyalty to French culture, and perhaps thereby to cover up the more essential features of their cult. For men like Ngô Minh Chiêu and Nguyen Ngoc Tuong, Vietnamese and Chinese spirits must surely have been more important than those of any Frenchman” (Smith 1970: 20).
5. Pham Cong Tac held the position of *Ho Phap*, or “Guardian of Religious Law,” and was the head of the *Hiệp Thiên Dai*, or legislative branch of the religion, which received laws from spirit séances and also administered justice (including possible excommunication) to those who violated religious law. Pham Cong Tac published the Religious Constitution of Caodai (*Pháp Chánh Truyền*), which was inspired by spirit messages, but after 1938 members of other denominations charged that he violated the separation of powers described in this constitution by assuming executive as well as legislative powers. Tac never formally held the title of Pope, but he was addressed by Tay Ninh followers as “His Holiness” and recognized in a painting with shifting perspectives as the spiritual successor of Buddha and Jesus Christ (in the Tay Ninh Holy See).
6. Captain Paul Monet (1884–1934) was a soldier who served in Indochina and in World War I, then returned to Hanoi and established a dormitory for Vietnamese students, publishing a bilingual journal and joining “Confucius,” the first Free Mason lodge to admit Vietnamese members. He wrote books critiquing racial exclusion in the colony: *Français et Annamites* (1926), *Entre Deux Feux* (1928), and *Les Jauniers* (1930), which argued that the exploitation of peasant labor was a “yellow slave trade” in which uneducated workers were duped into signing lifelong contracts. While Monet was known as an “Annamatophile,” he wanted to reform colonialism rather than end it all together. In a séance on 15 December 1926, the Spiritual Pope of Caodai, Li Thai Bach spoke directly to Monet, who attended the séance in Tay Ninh: “You have tried to create a moral relationship in this country between the two races of the French and the Vietnamese, so that they can live together in a community of shared lives and interests. Your wishes will be realized. . . . You will later be one of my most fervent disciples, preaching peace and harmony to the world.”
7. Caodai religious leaders were also been prominent members of the opposition party in the national government of the Republic of South Vietnam. After Vinh retired in 1965, he was replaced by Dinh Van De (one of the founders of the Caodai Institute in Saigon) as Vice Chairman of the National Assembly. De, who I interviewed in Saigon in the summer of 2004, explained that since he was seen as a critic of corruption in the Republic, he was not confined in a re-education camp but simply asked to follow courses from his home in Saigon. He retired from politics, and his teaching of meditation and esoteric mysticism at the Institute was heavily monitored by security personnel.
8. I use a narrow definition of diaspora developed by Hans von Ameshoot in a discussion of Moluccans in the Netherlands (2004: 151–174): “A diaspora is a settled community that considers itself to be ‘from elsewhere’ and whose concern and most important goal is the realization of a political ideal in what is seen as the homeland” (151). This diasporic perspective was developed by Zionists, but is also found among Cuban exiles in Miami and among many refugee groups who migrated in circumstances of persecution or civil war.
9. The Vietnamese transcript of this spirit message was handed to me when I attended a Caodai retreat at Thien Ly Buu Toa on August 30, 2004. It was translated with the assistance of Judy Vy-Uyen Cao, who attended the retreat with me, and a copy of the translation was sent to the temple for them to review. Many spirit messages received at Thien Ly Buu Toa are archived at the website www.thienlybuutoa.org.

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