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## Caodai Exile and Redemption

### A New Vietnamese Religion's Struggle for Identity

JANET HOSKINS

Caodaism is a new religious movement that was born in French Indochina in 1926 with a vision of religious unity and interracial harmony, formulated in contrast to colonial dislocations and repressions. From its inception, Caodaism has been preoccupied with seeking justice in this world and healing the wounds of colonialism, as well as combining the Asian spiritual traditions of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism in a new and dynamic religious organization that borrows from Catholicism and the French and American constitutions. Its scriptures, or sutras, come from spirit messages revealed to mediums, so its practice offers the possibility of a more personal conversation with God. The most famous Caodaist of the twentieth century, Pham Cong Tac, often erroneously called the "pope" of Caodaism, was in fact a spirit medium with the title "Defender of the Faith" (*Ho Phap*), whose college of mediums (Hiep Thien Dai, or Palace to Unite with Heaven) presented the doctrines and laws of the new religion.<sup>1</sup> He taught that justice could only be achieved when the people of the world realized that all religions came from the same origin, and accepted to live peacefully with others of different cultures and races.

Caodaism grew rapidly in early twentieth-century Indochina and had about four million disciples by the 1940s and 1950s. Although persecuted by both the French colonial government and the U.S.-sponsored Diem regime, it encountered its greatest hardships after the fall of Saigon in 1975, when the Communist victory virtually closed the religion down for many years. In the 1980s and 1990s, Vietnamese refugees began rebuilding their religion in exile, and by the turn of the twenty-first century there was a well-established transnational organization. The largest congregations of overseas Caodai disciples are found in California, and it is here that diasporic politics are also most accentuated, in both the "little Saigon" of Orange County and the "littler Saigon" of Silicon Valley.

This chapter examines how efforts to reconstitute Caodaism as a religion in California have been linked to struggles for social justice on four fronts. First, Caodaist exile is pictured as an exodus from the homeland in search of religious freedom, with a divine mission to spread this new faith of tolerance and unity around the world. This retrospective vision provides a meaning and a theodicy for the many years of war and suffering that Vietnamese refugees experienced, and it explains why the hardships of persecution, concentration camps, and dangerous escapes have only reinforced their faith. The trauma of flight is reinterpreted as a triumph of God's plan to globalize his message.

Second, diasporic politics focusing on the homeland have led to political activism in the field of human rights, religious freedom, and interfaith relations. There is a division between those activists most concerned with rebuilding the religion in Vietnam and those most concerned with expanding it to reach a wider audience in the United States. I refer to these two positions as the "religion in exile" vs. the "global religion of unity."

Third, Caodaism was founded as a more worldly version of Asian spirituality, and so its American disciples have also focused on various forms of social work, community activism, and resettlement efforts. These have included networks to help refugees find lost family members, reunite separated siblings and/or parents and children, and train for professional jobs. There are those who argue that during the early period, from 1975 to 1990, virtually all activities were directed primarily to social goals, but since 1990 it has been possible to pay more attention to theological and philosophical questions, as many refugee families are now established in new homes and professions in California.

Fourth, the help extended to Vietnamese refugees by Christian churches was not in fact disinterested charity, but part of a carefully calibrated campaign to gain converts from vulnerable refugee populations. Caodaists argue that since their faith is a modern one, an updated version of Asian traditions, it has been able to resist some of these pressures better than Buddhism, which has been described as hiding its face in California immigrant enclaves, where many other refugees have been pressured to convert to Protestant Christianity or Mormonism (Ong 2003).

I will begin with ways in which Caodai religious visions have always been preoccupied with issues of social justice, and the intersection between prophecy and history that has created the Caodai overseas mission. Then I will look more closely at the social and political issues that engage Caodaists in California today and their oscillation between a diasporic perspective and one more focused on global evangelization.

### **Caodaist Visions of Social Justice: Origins in Anticolonial Struggle**

Caodaism was born in French Indochina at the same time as the nationalist movement for independence, and its political history is closely tied to the spiritual

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needs of a new generation of intellectuals, trained in the finest French language schools but unable to assume positions of any real responsibility in the colonial bureaucracy. They worked as civil servants for a regime that educated them in democratic ideals but refused to follow these ideals in practice. In 1925–26, as student strikes shook the capital with protests, a group of younger office workers, hoping to find poetic inspiration by contacting the great literary minds of the past, began to practice spiritism, inspired both by Alain Kardec and by many centuries of Taoist automatic writing. They received a series of messages preaching that a unified religion was needed to make the brotherhood of man a reality, in which Jesus joined voices with the Jade Emperor, the Chinese poet Li Tai Pe, and the female Bodhisattva Quan Am in arguing for a truly multiracial pantheon combining elements of Eastern and Western traditions.

On Christmas Eve 1925, the Supreme Being, using the name Caodai ("roofless tower") announced to his disciples that this new faith was born to address the new needs of people in a global age of communication: "Formerly people lacked transportation and therefore did not know each other. I then founded at different epochs and in different areas, five branches of the Tao: Humanism, Shintoism, The Way of the Saints, The Way of Immortals and The Way of the Buddhas, each based on the customs of the respective race. In present days, transportation has been improved and people have come to know each other better but do not live in harmony because of the very multiplicity of their religions. That is why I have deigned to unite all of the religions back into one, to return them to the primordial unity" (Bui and Beck 2000, 14–15). The new religion emerged as a response to the crisis of modernity and particularly 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 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 of its temples and cathedrals. Below that stands Buddha, flanked by Lao Tse on his right and Confucius on his left, then Li Tai Pe (a Tang Dynasty poet of nature), flanked by Quan Am (sometimes called "the Chinese goddess of mercy") and the terrifying red-faced warrior Quan Cong. Jesus Christ stands 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, Joan of Arc, Shakespeare, Descartes, La Fontaine, Lenin, 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 170 spirit messages 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 that should eventually establish peace and harmony between all peoples, races, and religions. The conversations made possible by séances with European literary and historical figures created a space for a moral critique of colonialism, within the context of the early twentieth century, when the religion itself made an argument that Asians and Europeans were part of the same moral community and should obey the same ethical principles.

Caodaism was envisioned in the 1920s and 1930s as an autonomous community that had many of the characteristics of a Catholic mission station—schools, hospitals, weaving, and craft centers, even a fledgling university, with a governmental structure of its own. French colonial policies—which shifted from persecution to accommodation and alliance in the mid 1940s and 1950s—turned this into a state within a state in the overwhelmingly Caodaist province of Tay Ninh. During its heyday of political influence, Caodaists had their own police and armed forces, collected their own taxes, and lived out a Gandhiesque vision of a separate peace (Thompson 1937). Western journalists described the Holy See in Tay Ninh as a medieval walled city ruled by a Pope with a private army, but it is perhaps more accurate to see it as a hierarchical religious community similar to Buddhist theocracies in Tibet (Fall 1995; Greene 1955; Jensen 2000; Lewis 1951). During many long years of war, the Holy See served as a sanctuary for many people fleeing violence, although it was itself twice invaded—first by the French, who exiled its religious leaders from 1941 to 1946 for allegedly prophesying a Japanese victory, and second by the U.S.-supported Diem government, which wanted to crush its political and military influence. The American war was fought bitterly in Tay Ninh province, near the border with Cambodia, but since Caodaists were seen as overwhelmingly anti-Communist, their religious sanctuaries were generally respected.<sup>2</sup> One of the iconic images of the Vietnam war—the naked girl running in pain from napalm burns—is Kim Phuc, a ten-year-old Caodaist in Trang Bang, on the road to the Great Temple in Ta Ninh, who came to represent the suffering of Vietnamese children and civilians to the world (Chong 2000).

American and Russian writers (Blagov 1999; Buttinger 1967; Fall 1955; Werner 1981) have treated Caodaism as primarily a peasant political movement and have documented the ways in which Caodaists were caught in the cold war battles of 1950–75. But although this emphasis is understandable in the light of efforts on both sides of this conflict to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people, it is resented by Caodaists today. They argue that Caodaism was founded and led by Vietnamese intellectuals, and that despite its mass following

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it should be seen as an expression of cosmopolitan spirituality. More serious studies of it as a religion (Smith 1968, 1970; Oliver 1976) acknowledge its Chinese literary heritage and the blending of influences from Theravada Buddhism, Taoist occultism, Western spiritists, and theosophists.

### Exodus from Vietnam and Refugee Resettlement

Many present Caodai leaders were part of the first wave of Vietnamese refugees who were airlifted out after Saigon fell in 1975. The sudden military collapse of South Vietnam took almost everyone by surprise, and few of the people who left at that time saw themselves as immigrants. "We were just trying to get to a safer place," many told me, fully expecting that the country was not lost but simply under siege. They believed that after a big battle, the South Vietnamese would be aided by American forces and the country would be theirs. The evacuation itself was chaotic and disorganized, so many authorized people never got out, while others—particularly students—seized an opportunity and managed to escape, planning an interval of study abroad and then a return after just a few years. Ultimately, 130,000 of the Vietnamese rushed into planes and boats while the city fell were brought to the United States for resettlement—most of the relatively young, educated, urban, and professional. The country lost half of its medical doctors and many engineers, pharmacists, and professors. While there were few high-ranking Caodai dignitaries among the refugees, there were many of their sons and daughters. Because they were willing to work hard at jobs well below their previous positions, and to get themselves retrained in English, this first wave of immigrants proved quite successful: Just ten years after entering the country as state-supported refugees, most of them were earning above the national median income (Freeman 1999).

High levels of employment and educational achievement, however, tell only part of the story of families shattered and separated in wartime conditions, with many members never found and many others bearing burdens of survivor's guilt and traumatic memories. For the boat people who escaped illegally from 1975 to 1983, conditions were even worse, since they often suffered starvation, rape, and abandonment for several years in refugee camps on the way. A total of 700,000 Vietnamese came to the United States as refugees, and since 1980 another 200,000 have come as immigrants, under the Orderly Departure Program (established by the UN High Commission for Refugees to end the dangerous illegal departures) or the Humanitarian Operation established in 1987 for prisoners who served more than three years in reeducation camps (Freeman 1997). There are now about two million Vietnamese-Americans, and perhaps 20,000 of them are practicing Caodaists, although the number of former Caodaists who have yet to make contact with their coreligionists is probably as great as those who have.

The most traumatic policy of refugee resettlement was the breaking apart of extended families into nuclear families so that they could be dispersed and resettled with different sponsors (Freeman 1997; Kelly 1977). The scattering of Vietnamese refugees all over the country also worked against the formation of a sense of religious community and seemed likely to prove fatal to a minority religion like Caodaism. It is therefore nothing short of amazing that, after a decade of struggling for survival and many secondary migrations to reunite families, leaders of the religion have managed to reestablish a national and even international organization. They have done so because they have merged their religious commitment with a new diasporic consciousness, developed in the Vietnamese enclaves in California, Texas, and the Washington, D.C., area. Using modern technologies like the Internet and desktop publishing, they have come to make the overseas Caodai community into a new and influential force in both California and Vietnam.

### The Diasporic Perspective

Citizenship and working for national and international harmony are important themes in Caodaist theology, but today they are being contested and reinterpreted within a diasporic framework. I use a narrow definition of diaspora developed by Hans von Amey (2004, 153) 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." The idea of the diaspora developed from Zionism but is also found among Cuban exiles in Miami and among many refugee groups who migrated in circumstances of persecution or civil war.

Under this definition, the two most important diasporic communities of Vietnamese Americans are without doubt the "little Saigon" in Orange County and the "littler Saigon" of the Bay Area around San Jose. Half of America's 2 million Vietnamese live in California. 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 that 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 canceled 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 in December 2004 it also established the first direct air service between the United States and Vietnam in nearly thirty years (Moore and Tran 2004). For many years a number of Vietnamese American leaders discouraged contact with Vietnam, including

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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). 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 Teaching Center in Saigon (CQPTGL) and to consult with religious leaders in the homeland. 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.

### Problems in the "Land of Religious Freedom"

While the United States is seen as a land of religious freedom, and there are few direct efforts at suppression as in Vietnam, there are many more subtle problems that Caodaists have encountered as refugees and as new American citizens. The first and perhaps still most important is the ignorance of the American public about Vietnamese culture, despite almost two decades of military involvement. Since 1930 Caodai has been the third religion of Vietnam, and in 1975, the year of the fall of Saigon, it claimed 15–25 percent of the population of South Vietnam, but it was not even listed as a possible religious affiliation for incoming refugees, who had to choose from Buddhism, Catholicism, Confucianism, Hinduism, or Islam. For this reason, there are no statistics on how many Caodaist refugees actually came to the United States at entry points such as Camp Pendleton. When I asked committed Caodaists what they put under the category of religion, most said Caodai, but this may have been recorded as "form of Buddhism," or perhaps "Confucianism," since there was no category for "other." It is remarkable that despite the fact that several thousands of Caodaists undoubtedly did enter the United States at Camp Pendleton and other refugee camps in Arkansas, Virginia, and elsewhere, they did so without leaving any official trace.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, church sponsorship of refugees was generous and offered great practical assistance, but it almost always came along with heavy pressures to convert. Nine voluntary agencies assumed the task of finding sponsors for Vietnamese refugees, and over 80 percent of the refugees were placed by faith-based groups, including the United States Catholic Conference (the largest sponsor, which resettled almost 50 percent of all Vietnamese refugees), the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, and the Church World Service. Early reports about refugees' religious affiliation stressed the surprising fact (to Americans) that nearly half of all the refugees were Catholic (Montero 1979) and many had been educated in French. Since many Caodaists were among the French-educated elite, they may have been counted as Catholics, especially given the rushed conditions of arrival at refugee camps and the fact that both names employ the same initial letter.

Church sponsorship scattered Vietnamese refugees all over the country, where Christians would provide housing, clothing, and assistance with job training, usually with the expectation of regular church attendance and the hope of conversion. The Caodaist refugees I interviewed were all assigned to Protestant churches, and many were initially sent to rural areas of the South or the Midwest, the Bible Belt of Christian fundamentalism. Grateful for the assistance that they received, they reciprocated by attending church faithfully during the period that they were sponsored, hiding ancestral altars when ministers visited and agreeing to paper conversions as a ritualized farewell before choosing to relocate to another region.<sup>4</sup> (See Andrew Pham's *Catfish and Mandala* for a vivid fictionalized account of this in one family.) Committed Caodaists who did not convert were told in several instances that all the other refugee families were now Seventh-Day Adventists, Baptists, etc. There was a clear perception that baptism of the whole family was expected as a gesture of gratitude, and some Caodaists, in fact, rationalized these baptism ceremonies with the argument that since Jesus was a part of the Caodai pantheon, giving themselves to Jesus did not contradict a commitment to Caodai doctrine.

In California, the land of the New Age, many younger Vietnamese found the opportunity to experiment with a number of religious affiliations, usually starting with the church that sponsored their initial settlement and then moving on to dabble in Transcendental Meditation, Tibetan Buddhism, and Bahá'í. Three people now in their fifties who I interviewed had traveled through three or four faiths in the first two decades that they were in the United States, only to return to Caodai once they made contact with Caodai churches in the late 1990s. Others, such as the Web master for the Thien Ly Buu Toa temple near San Jose, had begun this experimentation in Vietnam, by frequenting the Syncretist Taoist Minh Ly temple in Saigon ("enlightened reason," a "pre-Caodaist" group founded in 1924 to unite the three traditions of Vietnam). He then became very active in Caodaism once he moved with family members to the Silicon Valley and came in



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contact with an exiled Caodai spirit medium and her disciples. For these reasons, many overseas Caodaist churches are much more open, tolerant, and less strictly hierarchical than the religious organizations in Vietnam, although this incorporation of new elements is also controversial and part of intergenerational dialogues within the faith.

### California Caodaists and Religious Centers in Vietnam

Caodaism today 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, 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 Caodaists (about 2.5 million).<sup>5</sup> It is often referred to as the Vatican of Caodaism, or its Rome, in contrast to the esoteric branch of its founder, Minh Chieu, which is sometimes called the Bethlehem of the religion, or the center of early prophecies and apocalyptic traditions, Tiên Thiên, which considers itself the Jerusalem. The new ecumenical teaching organization in Saigon, Co Quan Pho Thong Giao Ly Dai Dao (CQPTGL), draws its membership mainly from urban elites and has been described as the Jesuit branch of the religion and its intellectual center.

When asked to explain these divisions, most contemporary Caodaists blame the divisions on colonial policy. Paradoxically, I have heard *both* that Caodai was forced to split up as a strategy to escape the persecution of the French authorities (who did imprison, exile, and prosecute many religious leaders) *and* that the French themselves tried to divide the religion by rewarding dissidents with special favors (Oliver 1976). Overseas Caodaists, for the most part, are not particularly concerned with sectarian divisions and see the large number of different branches of the religion as a sign of its vitality and diversity. Many overseas temples recruit their members from all Caodaist churches and operate in a more inclusive and nonhierarchical fashion than the formal Caodaist organizations in Vietnam.

In Orange County, I collected many stories of how the religion was constrained and paralyzed under Communist control, and indeed most of the Caodai dignitaries who immigrated to the United States in the 1980s did so only after they were released from several years doing forced labor in reeducation camps. But their narrative of purity in exile—while true to the present situation of Tay Ninh—elided the fact that Caodai denominations in the heavily pro-Communist Mekong delta contained people who worked undercover for the Viet Cong. And while the temples of the Tay Ninh group remained resolutely

anti-Communist, and seem to have suffered for their resistance, all of those that we visited in 2003 in the Mekong Delta displayed large portraits and busts of Ho Chi Minh, and some proudly showed pictures of the "heroes of the liberation" who had fought for the communist cause.<sup>6</sup>

Since 1964, a nondenominational teaching organization (Co Quan Pho Thong Giao Ly Dai Dao) in Saigon has tried to bring the different denominations together and unify the religion around a shared body of teachings. Its former director, once the vice president of the National Assembly of the Republic of South Vietnam, now says he is grateful for the fact that the religion was as divided as much of the rest of the country by Vietnam's civil war. "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 to not only survive in the shadows but even come out again on the national stage."

After the reunification of Vietnam in 1975, Communist troops seized forty out of the forty-six buildings at the Tay Ninh Holy See, arrested 1,291 Caodai religious leaders, killed 39 of them in clashes, and sentenced 9 to death. More than 1,000 Caodai dignitaries were sent to reeducation camps, and 3,000 were reeducated in the province (Blagov 2001). When young people fled in large numbers in 1975, their families were subject to surveillance and investigated for espionage.

The Great Temple at Tay Ninh, with the imposing exterior of a Gothic cathedral, and an interior filled with Asiatic images of pastel dragons coiled around pillars and pulpits and a seven-headed snake surrounding the spirit medium's throne, was closed. From every stained glass window, the left eye of God looked out at North Vietnamese soldiers trying (unsuccessfully) to fly their new flag from its parapets. The government allowed services to begin again in 1980 but forbade people from rotating prayer groups at their homes on a twelve-day cycle. Spirit séances were forbidden, and no new bishops or cardinals have been appointed since 1975. Inspired by Western visitors who described the "Disneyfied fantasy décor" of the Great Temple, the government opened up a fun fair on the grounds of the Holy See, with carnival rides near the pope's house and a stand selling beef and liquor next to the residence of the vegetarian religious youth. In spite of these measures, attendance remained strong at Caodai festivals and ceremonies held on the new and full moon, with over a thousand people regularly kneeling at the midnight mass. In 1997, a ceremony was held to celebrate the government's recognition of Caodaism as Vietnam's third largest religion, but this recognition came at a price: Instead of following their own religious constitution, Caodaists had to accept being ruled by a Communist-appointed steering committee.

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

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fact that Tay Ninh is now the second largest tourist destination in South Viet-  
nam (after the War Remnants Museum, usually visited along with the Chu Chi  
Tunnels)—have helped Caodaists to renovate their churches, refresh the paint  
on their brightly colored facades, and gain new adepts among the new genera-  
tion. For those young Vietnamese trying to lead a religious life in a socialist  
republic, citizenship requires them to look to Ho Chi Minh as a moral example,  
and it has even been suggested that “Uncle Ho” could be incorporated into the  
Caodai pantheon as an archangel (*tiên*, immortal).

### Religious Activism and the Internet

The most important Catholic influence on early Caodai leaders was the religious  
and social activism of the Catholic Mission. Unlike Buddhist monks, Caodai dig-  
nitaries do not retreat from the world, live in monasteries, or take vows of celibacy  
as young men. They live in society and are often professionally accomplished  
(doctors, engineers, pharmacists, legislators, and professors of mathematics  
were the most common careers I found). The mother church in Tay Ninh has also  
built hospitals, schools, craft production centers, and even a university. Before  
the formation of its millenarian sibling Hoa Hao, and long before the “engaged  
Buddhism” of the 1960s that opposed Diem’s regime, Caodaism showed a model  
of how to modernize an ancient faith and make it relevant for those who want  
to take part in a global world.

Religious activism does not necessarily mean the same thing as political  
activism. Caodaists in Vietnam know enough to stay away from direct discussions  
of human rights issues or religious freedom; while remaining pragmatic, circum-  
spect, and obedient to state notions of citizenship, they are also running free tra-  
ditional medicine clinics for poor people in the inner city of Saigon, building a  
dormitory for university students who follow a vegetarian regime, and moving  
into the business of tourism in order to reach the many Euro-American visitors  
who visit their Holy See. Since 1997, Caodaism has been allowed to have a some-  
what higher public profile, and its five million followers, concentrated mainly in  
the former South Vietnam, claim about one out of every seven people there.

Caodaists have now also forged alliances with the Catholic church, which  
was once resentful of its stealing converts from them. In the explosive period of  
Caodaism’s first charismatic expansion, the new religion attracted more con-  
verts in one decade than the Catholic church had in three hundred years of  
proselytization (Werner 1981). They now collaborate with the United Church of  
Buddhism, whose self-immolating monks seared their way onto the front pages  
of newspapers in the Vietnam War era. And they have a relationship of spiritual  
fellowship and visiting with Oomoto, a Japanese religion founded in 1892, by an  
illiterate woman inspired to write out spirit messages by a deity now recognized  
as the Chinese spirit Li Po of the Tang dynasty, also the Spiritual Pope of Caodai.

Internet activism has played a particularly important role in the globalization of Caodai, especially since this globalization is to some extent based in the Silicon Valley of California, which is also a center for information technology.<sup>7</sup> Until recently, people in Vietnam were able to post information about religion on international Web sites. An English teacher and writer I met in Saigon had posted a series of interesting articles about the history of Caodaism and had corresponded with international scholars in English and French. A number of Web sites appeared in the United States, Australia, and Europe that detailed Caodaist beliefs and included the texts of spirit messages. The potential expansion of virtual religious communities in cyberspace was evidently seen as too dangerous by the Vietnamese government. A new State Ordinance on Beliefs and Religions issued in July 2004 and set to become law on November 15, however, "clarified" what it called the "socialist understanding of religious freedom" by forbidding any discussion of religion on the Internet, forbidding postings from anyone in Vietnam and requiring all religious officials to get government permission before speaking publicly in person, in print, or on the World Wide Web. Religious leaders in Vietnam are prevented from attending international conferences or meetings by being denied visas. In July 2004 several Caodai and Minh Ly religious leaders were invited to participate in the Parliament of World Religions in Barcelona, and none of those based in Vietnam were allowed to attend.

In spite of these regulations, Caodaists in Vietnam can still visit Web sites established overseas, even if they cannot post to them. Large and complicated Web sites in Vietnamese, English, and French are established by the Caodai Overseas Mission (<http://www.caodai.net>), the Tay Ninh international Caodai Mission (<http://www.caodai.org>), and important scholars and temples, including the Sydney Centre for Studies in Caodaism (<http://www.personal.usyd.edu.au/~cdao>), the Thien Ly Buu Toa Temple in San Martin, California (<http://www.thienlybuutoa.org>), and the French Caodaist Church (<http://www.caodisme.fr>). There are also dozens of personal Web sites that post documents about Caodai history and teachings, including bulletins on group activities and ceremonies, as well as archives of earlier scholarly studies. The Vietnamese government systematically blocks Internet sites that contain either pornography or religious content (two rather strange bedfellows) with firewall, but it is usually unable to cut off access entirely (cf. Amnesty International report on Internet regulations), so the internet remains an important form of communication even under heavy government restrictions.

### **Transnational Caodaism Takes Shape**

The syncretistic beginnings of this religious movement brought together what had previously been considered Asian philosophical traditions with a new activist and engaged perspective on worldly activities. Its Confucian elements celebrated

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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 based on the Buddhist ideal of the world renouncer. 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 Caodaism added to the mix was a more immediate technology of spirit communication. Caodai spirit mediums could 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. Caodai, as the Supreme Being, spoke directly to his disciples and encouraged them also to communicate with the other great spiritual leaders of history. In this way, the personal relationship with Jesus that is advocated by some Christian sects was expanded to include a much wider Asian pantheon of spirits, and a more cosmopolitan spirituality was born.

This more personal, direct, and activist form of religious communication also influenced the new religion's orientation to the world. Caodai prophecies contain millenarian elements that challenge the powers that exist today, at the same time that they show respect for many forms of occult knowledge that go back for centuries. In 1926, a spirit message predicted that after reunification Vietnamese would travel all over the world—and this is often interpreted as prophesying the exodus of 1975.

Because the Socialist Republic of Vietnam has not allowed spirit séances to ordain new religious officers in Tay Ninh, the leadership of Caodaism's largest denomination is decapitated—an aging group of dignitaries forced to administer their religion not according to its own constitution but according to the rules of a Communist-appointed management committee. Membership in many of the other denominations 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. This reverses certain hierarchical relationships between the Holy Sees in Vietnam and the diasporic communities in the United States and elsewhere, and it creates a series of new problems of religious inspiration and invention.

For the first generation of Caodai religious activists, the syncretic teachings of Caodaism were used to inspire a national movement and create the possibility of establishing this blended faith as a true national religion. Opposition to colonial rule coalesced around Pham Cong Tac and his conversations with spirits like Victor Hugo and Joan of Arc, who defended spiritism and the cause of Vietnamese independence as consistent with French ideals of spirituality, humanism, and democracy. For the generation that came of age during the American War, the Holy See was a sanctuary from combat, and living in the religious dormitories was a way to avoid obligatory military service. The united religious community

of Tay Ninh was said to be the one region that Communists were never able to infiltrate, but after the fall of Saigon the leaders of the religion paid for their ideological purity with their lives: Tran Quang Vinh, once the commander of the Caodai Armed Forces and the defense minister of Vietnam under the Bao Dai government, was arrested and died in a reeducation camp. The head spirit medium Ho Tan Khoa advised all Caodai disciples to respond to the banning of public rituals by turning to esoteric practices of meditation and self-cultivation (*vo vi*), but he was still arrested himself in 1983 for practicing spiritism and receiving millenarian messages associated with Halley's comet (Blagov 2001). Khoa lived out the rest of his days under house arrest, and his son Ho Thai Bach was executed for participating in a subversive organization. Eight thousand Caodaists were forced to take courses reviewing the state penal code in 1984.

Virtually all of the Caodai leaders I interviewed who came to the United States after 1980 did so when they were released from reeducation camps, spending an average of five years doing hard labor and being instructed in Marxist-Leninism. Just as scholars like Peter Zinoman (2001) have argued that the colonial Bastille served as a school for revolutionaries in French Indochina, so, too, the Communist reeducation camp deserves recognition as the central fulcrum of Vietnam's new revival of religious activity, even under conditions of extreme governmental constraints. In the early 1980s, after the deaths of many thousand boat people, the new rules of humanitarian transfer allowed once imprisoned political and religious refugees to leave Vietnam to make new lives elsewhere.

There is now a new generation, born in the overseas communities of California or in the newly reunified nation of Vietnam. 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 Vang Ly, the most senior Caodai leader in the United States, is the former Vietnamese ambassador to the United States, as well as the founder of Vietnam's diplomatic offices in India and Indonesia. His daughter, Merdeka (the Indonesian word for freedom or national independence), is an Oxford scholar who has written about Caodaism, and he sees the future of the religion as lying with Vietnamese educated overseas. "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."

He articulates the diasporic perspective, which sees Caodaism as a religion in exile whose members are all striving for religious freedom in their 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 Dac Bui, a California physician who coauthored *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, Caodaism has begun the process of disseminating its valuable and closely held esoteric information to the West. . . . 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, 312).

In September 2005, a group of Tay Ninh Caodaists in Garden Grove (“Little Saigon”) received a building permit to start construction of their own temple—a replica of the Holy See in a smaller format—and a groundbreaking ceremony was held on November 27, 2005. Projected to be finished in 2007, this Caodai Church of California (*thanh that Cali*) may become the first intentionally built temple in the New World, and the first place for Americans to see the colorful and eclectic hybrid architecture of this new religion.

#### Alternative Strategies: Encompassing American Religions within Caodaism

Efforts to spread the religion to non-Vietnamese Americans go hand in hand with public relations campaigns to make the teachings of this new faith better known and understood in the media and academic circles. Publishing books in English, translating Caodai scriptures and prayers, and participating in academic conferences are part of this agenda. There is an effort to gently address and perhaps even redress the patronizing attitude that many Western writers have taken toward religious innovations in Asia, and also the subtle prejudices of refugee workers and resettlement organizations. Aihwa Ong describes Mormon outreach organizations working with Cambodians in ways that resonate strongly with what I heard from Vietnamese refugees: “The recruitment and conversion of displaced populations . . . operate within a system of compassionate domination in which social support is accompanied by racial disdain, kindness is blended with cultural superiority, and acceptance is ordered by racial and gender configurations. Even as the church teaches the recruits the initiative and self-discipline for

negotiating the market economy and attaining the good life, this is done within a structure of white power that is more sharply inscribed than in the wider society, though continuous with it" (Ong 2003, 227). Gifts of used clothing, furniture, food and occasionally even money to pay rent and utility bills were appreciated by refugees, but the expectation of conversion was not. Ong suggests that many young Cambodians saw Buddhism as "something intangible, and perhaps irrelevant to the lives they wanted to lead in America" (Ong 2003, 214), and complained that it was taught only by example, not through books. Caodaism emerged in the early twentieth century because of a similar unease experienced by young people in French Indochina, so it has already developed certain modern elements that might make it better able to survive in exile: It is syncretistic, flexible, has an activist tradition and preaches a personal relationship with God. Its written scriptures (translated into French as "sutras," but into English as "Bibles") are in literary Vietnamese, and often in complex verse, so they are not easy to translate, but they can be taught in Sunday school format.

Compared to Cambodian refugees, many Vietnamese were better educated and (after twenty years of contact with the U.S. military) more able to do business in American terms. The elderly woman who is now the highest ranking Caodaist in California, Archbishop Tuyet, for example, bought a Chinese herbal shop just two weeks after her arrival in the United States and has built a flourishing business in San Jose. She received a spirit message that ordered her to build a temple, and since 1977 she has worked with the female spirit medium Bach Dien Hoa to run Thien Ly Buu Toa (Court of Heavenly Reason), the only Caodai prayer hall to continue to conduct spirit séances and post the results on the Internet.

The séances in San Jose present a new mandate from heaven for the religion in exile. In the "first Bible" of spirit messages received at the TLBT temple (*Dai Giác Thánh Giáo Pháp*), there are fifty-four messages, including fourteen from Caodai (Ngoc Hoang Thuong 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 Li Thai Bach (the Spiritual Pope), one from the Mother Goddess (Dieu Tri Kim Mau), one from Noah of the Old Testament, and one American spirit—Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism.

Joseph Smith is appropriated by American Codaists 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, etc.) on the outside of Mormon temples. It is perhaps significant that several non-Vietnamese Codaists, like Stephen Stratford and Ngasha Beck,<sup>8</sup> came from Mormon backgrounds but renounced Mormonism as racist and patriarchal, and have come to find Caodaism a more welcoming spiritual home.<sup>9</sup>



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On November 9, 2003, a spirit medium in San Jose received a message stat-  
ing that, since after 1975 the sacred centers in Vietnam (Hoi Thanh) could not  
communicate with Caodaists overseas, they should now listen to the direct spir-  
itual guidance of Li Po (also called Ly Thai Bach, the Spiritual Pope), and seven of  
its most important twentieth-century leaders (including Pham Cong Tac and the  
first disciple 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 immor-  
tals were alive, we were sometimes separated by divisions, so you should not fol-  
low that example but learn to work together more effectively. . . . You need to  
unify to become the lighthouse of the western world (*sáng chồi ở Tây Phương dẽ*)  
so that people can find peace, salvation and happiness."<sup>10</sup>

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 innova-  
tions forced by the present moment.

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. The Caodaist religious hierarchy, detailed in its *La constitution religieuse du Caodaïsme*, published by Pham Cong Tac in both Vietnamese and French, includes the grades of priest, bishop, cardinal, censor cardinal, and pope (using terms similar but not identical to Vietnamese Catholic grades), and its sacred city in Tay Ninh is called the Holy See (*Toa Thanh*). The first disciple to make contact with Caodai, Ngo Minh Chieu, was invited to be the pope but declined the position, which was then offered to Le Van Trung, the highest-ranking Vietnamese member of the French Colonial Council and a

- prominent businessman. Trung died in 1934, and on that very day a rival denomination was formed in Ben Tre, but its head, Nguyen Ngoc Tuong, was not allowed to return to the Holy See. Pham Cong Tac never renounced his own position as Ho Phap, and was thus unable to become pope, but he did take over executive powers and direct the Tay Ninh branch from 1936 to 1957, finally dying in exile in Cambodia in 1959. Three other Caodai denominations (Tien Thien, Ban Chinh Dao and Chon Ly) have Holy Sees that were once directed by a pope (all of them in the Mekong Delta: the first two in Ben Tre and the third in My Tho), but since 1960 no new popes have been elected, and at present the highest-ranking living dignitaries are archbishops, many of them female. (Women may rise to the rank of cardinal in Caodaism, and the first female cardinal is represented on the front of the Tay Ninh cathedral beside the first pope.)
2. An exception to this policy of respect is narrated in the (fictionalized) bestseller *The Green Berets*, which describes American Special forces blowing up what is called "a Cao-Dai pagoda," and describing Caodaists as "religious zealots" and "spook sheeted dick-heads" (Moore 1965, 129). One camp commander notes, more sympathetically: "Though he might well suspect that the local Cao-Dais, one hundred and fifty miles from the sect's main strength in Tay Ninh province, were being terrorized into helping the Viet Cong, still the religious bond they shared was stronger than most Westerners could realize" (Moore 1965, 129). The extensive damage we saw on Caodai temples, especially those in the Mekong Delta, makes it clear that it was perhaps not unusual.
  3. The official statistics from Camp Pendleton, however unreliable, are the following: 55 percent were listed as Catholics, 27 percent as Buddhists, 11 percent as Confucians, and 5 percent as having no religion (Freeman 1997, 54). Catholics number about 8 percent of the total population of reunited Vietnam, with Buddhists counted as 15 percent, Caodaists as 8 percent, and Hoa Hao as 2 percent. Government statistics in Vietnam do not count "Confucians," but this might indeed have been a category that was used to "store" unidentified Caodaists in the United States. Since many Vietnamese boat people were ethnically Chinese, it is also likely that they made up a substantial number of the "Confucians."
  4. Andrew Pham's *Catfish and Mandala* is a beautifully written memoir of the Vietnamese migration experience and the author's return to Vietnam that contains a vivid description of one paper conversion in Louisiana.
  5. Statistics about Caodai membership are controversial. Here I have relied on the numbers collected by the ecumenical teaching organization the Co Quan Pho Thong Giao Ly in Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City (henceforth CQPTGL), and the widespread estimate of 5 million. Government statistics usually place the total number of Caodaists at four million, and in 2004 estimated that the number of Ban Chinh Dao followers was somewhat more than the followers of Tay Ninh. Tay Ninh still has the largest number of temples (500 temples to Ban Chinh Dao's 300), and Tay Ninh leaders maintain that it, as the "First Church of Caodaism," is and will remain the largest denomination (personal communication, fieldwork in Vietnam in 2004). There are twenty-three branches (*phái*) of Caodaism, but only nine are recognized according to the government rules and conditions for recognition, which require more than 50,000 members, and presence in more than three provinces.
  6. The Mekong Delta denominations of Ban Chinh Dao (The Reformed Religion) and Tien Thien (Primordial Unity) are now seen as more politically correct than Tay Ninh, but they were also closed down by the government of reunified Vietnam from 1975 to 1997. They have recently been allowed to reopen their temples and expand their

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ao (The Reformed Religion) and politically correct than Tay Ninh, t of reunified Vietnam from 1975 1 their temples and expand their

- membership in part because the pope of Ban Chinh Dao renounced spiritism back in 1934, and this denomination now practices only meditation and spiritual cultivation of the self. In 2003, several books, plays, and television shows appeared celebrating the heroism of Mekong Delta Caodaists Nguyen Ngoc Nhu, Nguyen Ngoc Bich, and Cao Trieu Phat in fighting with the Viet Minh, publicizing a more patriotic past for these groups. Tay Ninh is now run by a government-appointed management committee, but its disciples have been more resistant to government control than many of the smaller branches, emphasizing large-scale ritual congregations and ritual—including lavish music and processions—which are less important in the smaller denominations.
7. In 1997, the Silicon Valley had the second largest concentration of Vietnamese in the United States, and 1,645 Vietnamese engineers, 478 computer scientists, 289 managers, 2,272 secretaries and administrative support people, 2,472 engineering and science technicians, 1,299 other technicians, and 1,422 assemblers (Freeman 1997).
  8. Ngasha Beck was called to Caodaism by a vision of the Divine Eye, which she now believes came from Victor Hugo: "It was in 1993, I believe. I was reclined in meditation when a shining image of the Divine Eye came shooting from infinity toward me, and at the time that it collided or encompassed me there was a very loud sound like a gun going off beside each ear, which jolted me upright. It was instantaneous; there was no thought, no sentiment other than wonder possible in the time frame of the vision. But unlike a dream, it did not fade as moments passed; instead, there was like an urgency to understand. And unlike most meditations, I did not emerge contented but rather searching my mind, seeking for answers. . . . I remembered that I had read or heard somewhere about a Vietnamese religion who worshipped an Eye and had Victor Hugo as a Saint. I hadn't been to school (proper) and didn't know who Victor Hugo was, other than he was famous for something. Even so, I felt right about asking Victor Hugo if he would guide me, to do so. Suddenly, everywhere I looked, the newspaper, TV, there was mention of Victor Hugo. There were just too many coincidences. I now believe that Victor Hugo is the one who named me" (e-mail to author, April 10, 2004).
  9. The spirit message from Joseph Smith indicates that both Mormonism and Caodaism came from the same source—God—and that they share many goals, "so you do not need to abandon your religion and change to ours. . . . God's will is to have all religions united. . . . You need to make a wise decision. . . . To escape the huge earthquake which is coming soon. . . . You need to practice religions more and leave fame and wealth aside" (<http://www.thienlybuutoa.org>, accessed September 15, 2004).
  10. Vietnamese text accessed September 15, 2004, at <http://www.thienlybuutoa.org>, translated with assistance from Judy Vy-Uyen Cao.