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The Global Religious Imagery of the Cult of Duc Cao Đài

Abstract: In 1926, in Tây Ninh province, about 100 km away from present day Ho Chi Minh City, a new spiritual movement was born, aiming at the symbolic unification of all the world's major religions into one. Its hierarchical structure resembles Roman Catholicism while on the other hand integrating elements from Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism and Islam. Besides worshipping the prophetic figures of the world major religions (Jesus Christ, Buddha and Mohammed), the Cao Đài claim to have communicated in spiritist séances with secular western and eastern literary, historical and political figures such as William Shakespeare, Victor Hugo, Jeanne D'Arc, Sun Yat Sen, Vladimir Lenin and the Vietnamese poet and prophet Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, worshipping some of these (but not all) as saints. Within the present article, I aim at analyzing the syncretic religious imagery of the Cao Đài and discuss the manner in which they construct their religious narrative as well as worldview.

Keywords: Cao Đài; Vietnam; South East Asia; Indochina; Christianity; Buddhism; Taoism; Confucianism.

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I first encountered Cao Đài during one of the trips to Southeast Asia I undertook with my wife. At the time I knew little more about the movement other than that they worshipped as saints literary figures such as Victor Hugo and that they claimed to have founded a Universalist religion that aims at bringing together elements from all major world religions. I found it interesting to investigate the phenomenon for myself so we put it on our map of cultural locations to visit in the area. In order to reach our destination, we booked a 10-hour flight from Budapest to Shanghai. From there, we took another connecting 5-hour flight towards the south of the Asian continent to Tân Sơn Nhất International Airport in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam where we rented a motorcycle and rode north, for approximately 100 km towards the Cambodian-Vietnamese border until we reached Tây Ninh province and the village of Long Hoa for our first encounter with the Cao Đài.

Historical Roots of the Cao Đài

Firstly, in order for us to properly understand the historical context that led to the emergence of the Cao Đài as a

Fig. 1. Cao Đài's Main Religious Symbol: The Left Eye of God (Foto: Personal Archive)

religious phenomenon we need to note the difference between the two distinct forms of educational background that informed young people's formation during the colonial era in South East Asia. The relevant distinction is between those that studied abroad (particularly in France) and those that studied in language schools in Vietnam. While both groups tended to oppose French colonial rule, the educational paths undertaken bore a great deal of influence on the ideas they would later espouse and develop. McConnell explains in *Leftward Journey: The Education of Vietnamese Students in France*, that those who studied abroad in France were more likely to become "westernized" and join Communist movements than those who attended language schools in Vietnam.¹ Janet Hoskins points out that, due to the rupture caused by studying abroad, many did not struggle as intensely to reconcile Asian philosophical

traditions with European modernity. They simply accepted the logic of a European dialectic and returned home to claim their rights to their native land in the name of an external ideology.² To give some examples we need only examine the biographies of socialist Southeast Asian leaders many of whom traveled to France extensively where they either studied or wanted to study and where in the end joined Communist movements.

Cao Đài however was founded by Vietnamese literati and civil servants studying and living in Vietnam who did not have the opportunity or wish to travel to France, remained more faithful to Asian culture and tradition and tended to view socialism as yet another ideological import from the west, not fully in tune with the values their fathers and grandfathers. As Hoskins pointed out, they struggled more to reconcile Asian philosophical tradition with European modernity rather than adopting another western ideology.

Major Tenets of the Faith

Cao Đài is a monotheistic syncretic and spiritist religious movement. The full name is Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ (The Great Faith of the Third Universal Redemption)³ while the shorter title "Cao Đài" means "High Tower", a Taoist epithet for the supreme god. Its website describes both what the Cao Đài want and do not want to achieve:

The noble effort of the Cao Đài is to unite all humanity through a common vision of the Supreme Being, whatever our minor differences, in order to promote peace and understanding

throughout the world. Cao Đài does not seek to create a grey world where all religions are exactly the same, only to create a more tolerant world, where all can see each other as sisters and brothers from a common divine source reaching out to a common divine destiny realizing peace within and without.⁴

Believers engage in prayer, veneration of ancestors, nonviolence and vegetarianism with the purpose of achieving union with God and freedom from samsara. According to their teachings there are 3 main religions incorporated into the Cao Đài worldview (Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism) as well 5 main branches: 1. The doctrine of the Buddhas, which includes Brahmanism and Buddhism, 2. The doctrine of the Seraphims, which includes Taoism 3. The doctrine of the Saints, which includes Christianity, Catholicism, Protestantism and Islam 4. The doctrine of the Genies, which includes the Chinese, Greek and Egyptian Mythologies 5. The doctrine of the Sages, which include Confucius and Mencius.⁵

Being a spiritist religion, the doctrine, philosophy, prayers, rituals, music, organization and management is claimed to have come from spiritist messages either from God, the Holy Mother Goddess, Jesus Christ, Buddha or other divinities. In terms of their creation myth, they claim that their Cosmos-genesis is compatible with what the scientists call the “Big Bang” theory. They claim spirits told them that when the Big Bang happened, the masculine element (Yin) emerged, which was God, Duc Cao Đài, The Supreme Being or the Jade Emperor, to mention just some

of the names attributed to him. He then created a female element (Yan). With the help of these elements, he created planets, galaxies, stars and everything in the universe. The Supreme Being then created life on these planets by creating first plants, animals and then humans.⁶ The journey of humans through life is to achieve a higher and higher status becoming (in this order) angels, saints, immortals and finally buddhas when they reach Nirvana. According to what the spirits communicated, there are 72 planets similar to ours in the Universe and our planet Earth is ranked number 68. Our spirits move from planet to planet depending on the level of advancement and purification of the spirit.⁷

Cao Đài believe that a human being is composed of a spirit provided by the Supreme Being, a material body and a perispirit, which is a link between the spirit and the body provided by the Mother Goddess. The material body dies but the spirit continues to live forever. With regards to the purposes of life, the Cao Đài enumerate 3 which are to repay his/her debts from previous lives (karma and reincarnation), to study more in order to achieve a higher degree of perfection and pass trials imposed by God, to fulfill a mission assigned by God or high divine spirits (ex. the mission to assist in the advancement of humanity). The ultimate goal of a spirit is to return to live near God and attain the highest degree of purification.⁸

Cao Đài follows a set of 5 Commandments or prohibitions. They are prohibited from killing, stealing, drinking alcohol and eating meat, living a luxurious life, committing lewd acts and lying.⁹ As we can see, the commandments are similar to those found in Christian doctrine. Among the

virtues that the Cao Đài seek to follow and promote we find: modesty, moderation, prudence, justice, respect and concession.

As Christopher Hartney mentions in *Vietnamese Esoterica and the Chinese Mystical Model*, when the Cao Đài make offerings to the Supreme Being/Jade Emperor, they are supposed to walk in the shape of the Chinese character of *xin* (heart) (心) according to Confucianism.¹⁰ They also move their right hand forming the sign of the cross touching their forehead, chest, right and left shoulder. This is said to symbolize the Three Refuges of Buddhism (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha) but some have also made a parallel to the Holy Christian Trinity.

Syncretism is again another major tenet of the faith. The Cao Đài acknowledge that sometimes it is difficult to reconcile the exclusivity that western religious thinkers claim with the universal claims of the Cao Đài. However, they point out that if you take into account the history of the Judeo-Christian tradition, you can observe connections and similarities between Egyptian religions and that of Israel, between Persian Zoroastrianism and Christianity or between Christianity and Islam. That is similar in Asia as well, however, the difference is that different traditions were built and relied on each other.¹¹ They see as problematic the fact that particularly in the West and in the Middle East these interrelationships between religions are not being emphasized, are ignored or even there is even a manifested need to erase the connections. In their view, Caodaism brings Eastern tolerance to the West¹² by focusing on the common ground between different spiritual traditions rather than on the differences. It is thus in essence a vast effort in comparative religion.

Fig. 2. The Third Alliance – Mural in the Tay Ninh Holy See representing Victor Hugo, Sun Yat Sen and Vietnamese poet and prophet Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (Foto: Personal Archive)

The mural shown above represents three individuals as the signatories of the “Third Alliance” between God and humankind. The first individual on the left is Sun Yat Sen. He is the founder of the first Chinese Republic and is depicted holding an inkstone that symbolizes Chinese Culture. The Reverend Canh Tran (who is a Cao Đài overseas missionary currently living in Orange County California) revealed to me when I interviewed him that Sun Yat Sen’s holy task to humanity is to spread Cao Đài to China in the far future. Next to him is the French Romantic poet and writer Victor Hugo who acts as the foreign missionary of Caodaism. He is depicted as writing with a feather pen that represents western civilization. Further to the right

is the 16th Century Vietnamese poet and prophet Nguyễn Bình Khiêm. Rev. Canh Tran presented the poet in our interview as being “the Nostradamus of Vietnam”. He is depicted as writing in Chinese characters the same message that appears written in French by Victor Hugo, thus joining eastern and western cultures, that is “God and Humanity, Love and Justice”. This is in essence “The Third Alliance” that believers need to live up to. Rev. Tran mentioned to me that Nguyễn Bình Khiêm has the title of “Master of the White Lodge”, ranking above both Victor Hugo and Sun Yat Sen, his task for humanity being achieved only in the spiritual plane. Tran also recommended that I read more about the French teacher Hypolyte Léon Denizard Rivail who wrote under the pen name of Allan Kardec, a suggestion I will pass on to those interested to understand more about the spiritual plane, spiritism and the Cao Đài.

Saints, Enlightened Beings and Simple Messengers

The Cao Đài have a vast pantheon of saints, enlightened beings as well as a list of literary or political figures belonging to different countries and cultures to whom they claim to have communicated during spiritist séances such as Victor Hugo, William Shakespeare, Jeanne D’Arc, J.J Rousseau, R. Descartes, Sun Yat Sen, Confucius, Pericles, La Fontaine, Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, Vladimir Lenin and others. While Janet Hoskins names these as being “spiritual advisers”¹³, it has emerged in my conversation with Rev. Tran that the status of the above mentioned figures differs within the religion, not every one of these figures being as important as the

trinity of Victor Hugo, Sun Yat Sen and Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, some being simply spirits that expressed their opinion about Cao Đài during séances.

It is important to notice however that many of the figures mentioned have in their time been literary, political or philosophical champions of their people or individuals that were considered as being in contact with divinity or the spirit world. The Cao Đài claim to receive their knowledge through spiritual séances. It is through these séances that they receive their knowledge and claim to have communicated with both Jeanne D’Arc and Victor Hugo.

But who is Jeanne D’Arc? And why would she communicate with the leader of the Cao Đài. As we know, she is a well-known champion of France who fought against the English domination of her country. She is also canonized as a saint by the Catholic Church. Before being burned at the stake by the English, Jeanne stated that experienced visions of Saint Michael, Saint Catherine and Saint Margaret who told her to drive the English out of France. Thus, she was a peasant girl fighting a foreign power that was occupying her country which in some ways mirrors Cao Đài’s national struggle since Vietnam was part of colonial France at the time, a state of affairs which the members of the faith opposed. As stated before, the founders of Cao Đài studied in French schools in Vietnam so they had intimate knowledge of western historical figures and western culture. Besides this, there is a long list of Vietnamese female heroes that opposed empires such as the Trung sisters or Lady Triệu. They too are worshipped as saints in Vietnam (but by another Vietnamese folk religion,

the Đạo Mẫu). Secondly, there is the detail of Jeanne D'Arc's visions. As Jammes notes, Caodaism is a revealed religion, with an elaborate hierarchical structure very similar to that of Roman Catholicism (yes, they have a Pope), and set of laws received by spirit mediums from 1925 to 1934.¹⁴ Jeanne D'Arc also is said to have communicated with the spirit world so, in a mystical sense, if she could communicate while being alive with the world of saints, the Cao Đài claimed that she communicated with them while being in the spirit world herself.

Then there is the figure of Victor Hugo, the French romantic poet and novelist that is canonized in the Cao Đài pantheon as a saint. The reasons for this choice are similar to those mentioned before and we can understand this by going to the author's biography. Hugo was a great enemy of Napoleon III who conquered Indochina. He was an opponent of the capital punishment and condemned French crackdowns on religious dissidents. He was also known for speaking in séances to condemn colonial conquest and the "tyranny of potentates".¹⁵ For reasons such as this he qualifies as a figure revered by the Cao Đài. However, there is more. As Chambers notes, it appears that Hugo enjoyed Vietnamese poetry, practiced spiritism and vegetarianism and while conducting a séance in 1835 he was told that he would be "resurrected" in the 20th Century as part of a new universal religion that unites Asian spirituality with European technological power.¹⁶

In 1949, on the anniversary of Hugo's death, Tac revealed that Hugo was a more recent incarnation of the Vietnamese poet Nguyễn Du, thus giving him a spiritual lineage that fused European and Asian

poetic traditions.¹⁷ As both Janet Hoskins and Rev. Canh Tran point out, Victor Hugo remains the "the spiritual head of the Overseas Mission" for Tây Ninh Cao-daists and should be consulted about how to translate Cao Đài scriptures for the wider world.¹⁸ However, there hasn't been any direct communication with Hugo in over 30 years. A Cao Đài leader Trần Quang Vinh claims to be the spiritual son of Victor Hugo. He claims that in a séance, his spiritual father came down to greet him and congratulate him on his achievements, using Hugo's preferred verse form of alexandrine couplets.¹⁹

The Chinese political leader Sun Yat Sen is also revered as a saint by the Cao Đài. Sun Yat Sen is famous for being respected both in mainland China and in Taiwan as one of the leaders of the Xinhai Revolution that ended the Qing Dynasty. The Cao Đài may have canonized Sun Yat Sen for his ability as a great leader as well as maybe for his political philosophy that included the three principles of Mínhzú (independence from foreign domination), Mínhquán or "rights of the people" (sometimes translated as "democracy"), and Mínhshēng people's livelihood (sometimes translated as "communitarianism" or "welfare").²⁰ These were of course values that the Cao Đài upheld themselves in a Vietnamese context and therefore found relevant. As stated before, Rev. Tran told me that Sun Yat Sen's mission is to spread Cao Đài teachings to China.

Of course, there are many other saints and figures that communicated with the Cao Đài during séances in the pantheon but due to the limited number of pages dedicated to the present work I cannot discuss all in detail. All in all, we are dealing

Fig. 3-4. Tay Ninh Holy See
(Foto: Personal Archive)

with figures that were either respected for their achievements in their home countries, they were somehow supportive of national independence from occupying powers, they were involved in spiritual practices or simply very good writers. In fact, Caodaists are quick to remember to point out that Jesus himself was an “oriental” colonial subject of a European empire based in Rome. He was arrested and charged as being a nationalist agitator (calling himself “the King of the Jews”) and crucified because of his leadership in a struggle that was interpreted as being for the self-determination of his people.²¹

Syncretic Architecture

The first thing we can observe when visiting the Tây Ninh Holy See is that the main religious building combines from an architectural perspective the styles of Catholic Cathedrals, Buddhist Pagodas and Islamic Mosques, a type of eclectic fusion architecture that foreshadows one of the main tenets of the Cao Đài faith, which is a syncretism between the spiritual traditions of the world. As Hùm Đắc Búi mentions, it is a combination of three principal architectures as modeling the dimensions of a syncretistic theology: the Catholicism is marked by its verticality (bell tower and drum tower), the Buddhism by its horizontality (the Nine Sphere Palace in the middle and the Octogonal Palace in the rear) and the Islamism by its sphericity.²²

Religious Symbolism

In Fig. 6 we can see, as Rev. Tran explained to me during our interview, the pantheon of Cao Đài saints which include Lao Tzu, Buddha Sakyamuni, Confucius, Kwan Yin Boddhisatva, Jesus Christ, Guan Yu, Li Bai and Jiang Ziya. Rev. Tran made the observation that Victor Hugo is venerated as a saint too, but separately, as a part of the White Lodge that includes Sun Yat Sen and the poet and prophet Nguyễn Bình Khiêm. The greatest religious symbol the Cao Đài use is the left eye of god (thiên nhãn). They usually place it at the top of every one of their altars as well as on the movement’s flag, publications and the religious hats worn by high-ranking prelates during ceremonies. They also usually place the symbol inside a triangle pointing upwards and flashing rays

Fig. 5. Cao Đài Altar

Fig. 6. The Pantheon of Cao Đài Saints

of sun emanate from the three sides of the triangle. As westerners we might notice the uncanny resemblance to a very similar symbol used by the Freemasons in the west (the divine eye) or the eye that is placed on top of the dollar bill. However, as Đỗ Văn Lý, the former South Vietnamese Ambassador to the United States and Japan mentions, while the image of the eye may be similar to the ones employed in the west, its symbolic meaning is different making a distinction between the left and right eye of God representations as being opposites in terms of the worldview they represent. However, as he points out that being opposite in meaning does not necessarily mean being incompatible as everyone uses two eyes to see. He comments:

The Vietnamese and the Americans are the two peoples who worship under the sign of the eye. We have it in our temples, you have it on a sacred object in your society - the dollar bill. Yours is the right eye. Ours is the left eye. The left eye is closer to the heart. It is connected to morality, tradition and ethics. The right eye is closer to the brain. It is connected to technology, industry and development. America has given the idea of democracy to the world, but they have lost the ethical dimension. One day there will be a people that will develop that ideal of democracy and bring it back to the

world with its original ethics. These people will be the Vietnamese.²³

Janet Hoskins also argues that the left eye of god is used as a focus point for mediation and visualisations. Looking at God through the left eye reclaims the positive, forceful and righteous perspective of Asian wisdom, which encompasses and triumphs over the limited “right-eyed” perspective of colonialism.²⁴

There are of course many other interesting things about the worldview of the Cao Đài such as the role and imagery assigned to women and femininity within the faith. The Cao Đài allow women to be priests, archbishops and cardinals and they worship a Mother Goddess to whom they erect temples in parallel to the male Jade Emperor. This however, I will leave these details for a future article.

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