

**Visions of Vietnam, The Nationalism of the Caodai: Religious Sect and
Mass Movement**

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In the late 1920s, the Caodai emerged in southern Vietnam as a burgeoning religious movement. The sect drew upon historic syncretic practices, aiming to combine the best of Eastern and Western religions to bring about the restoration of Vietnam's past glory.

Colonial oppression and disenchantment with traditional religious practices provided favourable circumstances for the Caodai to appeal to both the rural peasantry and the urban elite, creating an unprecedented union between the disparate classes.¹ By unifying its followers under a distinctly Vietnamese religion, and harnessing their desire for independence, the religious sect quickly transformed into a mass movement during the 1930s. In the face of colonial and Communist powers, the Caodai pursued a vision of nationalism and their own doctrinal objectives to varying degrees of success. While taking part in nationalist rebellions throughout South Vietnam's turbulent history, the movement remained distinctly Caodai. By transforming and adapting to the social and political environment, the movement survived persecution, but also maintained its religious foundation. Caodaism unified the peasantry and elite through a unique Vietnamese religious identity that allowed them to assert nationalist resistance on a mass scale for the first time in Vietnam's history.

The cultural diversity of Vietnam had much to do with the eventual influence of the Caodai. The early settlement of Indian and Chinese populations and later French colonial rule established Taosim, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Catholicism together with indigenous practices of animism and spiritism. Because of the constant flux of migrating peoples throughout their history, the Vietnamese came to place great importance upon adopting and adapting foreign ideas in order to define and sustain their own identity.² Building upon the history of cultural flexibility, the Caodai came to epitomize Vietnam's cultural endurance.

¹ Victor L. Oliver, *Caodai Spiritism: A Study of Religion in Vietnamese Society* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 20, 25.

² Arne Kislenko, "Cao Dai Temple," in *The United States at War*, ed. Paul Pierapoli (Los Angeles: ABC-Clio, 2008), 430.

The Caodai was founded in Cholon, a suburb of Ho Chi Minh City in southern Vietnam, by Ngo Van Chieu (1878-1932), a bureaucrat for the French colonial administration who was fascinated by religion. After Chieu performed a series of séances, God revealed himself to him as Caodai in 1921 and instructed him to establish a new religious movement.³ Caodaism was to be a syncretic faith, one which would unite the best of the Eastern and Western religious systems present in Vietnam in order to usher in the Third Amnesty of God, or the age of renovation. This was in line with the millenarian belief that in the final cycle of history, Caodaism would “unite the world’s races, save humanity and regenerate mankind.”⁴ The syncretic and salvationist conception of religious purpose proved to be appealing as the movement gained a small but growing group of devotees, and the religion was made public in 1926.

The Caodai belief system and organizational structure exemplified how the sect embraced elements of each seemingly disparate religion. The doctrines incorporated vegetarianism, spirit communication, séance inquiry, and self-cultivation by drawing from commonalities between Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and indigenous practices. The Caodai dignitaries organized how those practices were administered in a structure more similar to the Roman Catholic Church by designating positions such as pope, bishop, and priest. The permanent center for the dignitaries and their activities was a massive temple, the Tanh Dia or the Holy See, which was built in Tay Ninh province from 1933 to 1955.⁵ Although critics felt that the Caodai’s merging of the religions was superficial and inconsistent, many adherents perceived the ambiguity as positive and recognized the potential for the movement to serve a wide variety of needs. The synchronization of the Eastern and Western faiths did in fact create a religious force that successfully established a large and diverse following.

³ Khanh Phan, *Caodaism* (London: Minerva Press, 2000), 16-17.

⁴ Jayne Susan Werner, *Peasant Politics and Religious Sectarianism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 7.

⁵ Oliver, 20, 25; Phan, 37; Kislenco, 430.

It is important to note that the willing acceptance of the Caodai's multifaceted belief system was not due to a new interpretation of religion. Rather, the movement's success is due in part to Vietnam's history of syncretic religious movements. The practice of melding diverse beliefs was a convention of Vietnamese religious culture, a custom that allowed for the redefinition of spiritual identity in the face of colonial domination.⁶ Part of the Caodai's success was a result of their understanding the historic importance of religious syncretism, but also the movement's well-timed emergence during a unique historical moment.

Religious movements like the Caodai, founded by upper-class men such as Ngo Van Chieu and Pope Le Van Trung, also found themselves opposing colonial domination.⁷ The desire of Caodai dignitaries to find and propagate religious syncretism posed a political threat to the Catholicism of French rulers, a threat that motivated the Caodai's following.

While the leadership of the Caodai was primarily composed of the educated elite, its adherents were largely drawn from the rural peasantry. Although Vietnamese peasants had been subjected to misery for many years, the social and political conditions of the 1930s were especially volatile. The Depression left many peasants landless or deeply indebted to landlords, while the amount of rice for consumption dropped drastically and village life deteriorated.⁸ The dignitaries, searching for Caodai converts, capitalized on the mounting civil unrest, and they promised peasants both salvation and exclusion from taxes should they choose to convert. Assuring both spiritual and material protection, the Caodaist movement gained rapid momentum among oppressed peasants in southern Vietnam, amassing between 500,000 and 1 million followers in Cochinchina by 1930.⁹

⁶ Werner 11-12.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁸ Blagov, 73; Werner, 5.

⁹ Blagov, 73-74.

Due to the swift transformation from religious sect to mass movement, scholars debate whether the adherence to Caodaism was a revolutionary response from a non-politicized peasantry or if it fulfilled a religious need among radical peasants.¹⁰ While questioning the role of Caodaism is compelling, there is very little definitive information to explain the motives of adherents before or during their involvement with the movement. In fact, the Caodai made deliberate efforts to conceal their intentions from authorities and outsiders of any kind, a secretive practice that was part of Vietnamese religious tradition.¹¹ Although the appeal of the movement to its followers is intriguing, it is arguable that the more influential dynamic of Caodaism may be the unique relationship it created between the elite leadership and the peasant adherents.

Unlike any previous movement, Caodaism successfully connected members of the upper urban class to the rural masses. While the rural peasantry received protection from exploitative French powers, the dignitaries amassed a following that allowed for the dissemination of their religious doctrine.¹² Whether converts were seeking social change or a religious outlet, it was only because of the concurrence of the urban influence and mass rural support that the faith developed into a mass revolutionary movement. Through a uniquely Vietnamese religion, the elite and peasants shared a common identity that allowed them collectively to resist colonial oppression.

Caodaist political activity was detected as early as February 1930. In a special cable from Paris to *The New York Times*, it was reported that French political agents in Vietnam believed the

¹⁰ Blagov 73-74; Werner, 4, 6, 15.

¹¹ R.B. Smith, "An Introduction to Caodaism. I. Origins and Early History" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 33.2 (1970): 335.

¹² Werner 15, 26.

religion was being used in “a subtle way to arouse the people to rebellion.”¹³ This suspicion was justified when elite members of the Caodai sought to liberalize the colonial regime during a series of anti-tax rebellions that contributed to the urban reform movement in Saigon from 1930-1931. Although the uprisings were violently repressed by the French, the Caodai were given substantial publicity as the only successfully active mass movement at the time. Through their political action, Caodaists became unified by more than their religious identity as they began to align themselves with a growing nationalist movement.

At this point, it is important to clarify the meaning of nationalism in relation to the Caodai. It has been argued that the Caodaist doctrine lent itself to nationalistic endeavours since the religion’s stated purpose was partly to “restore harmony to a troubled world and revive moral rectitude in the face of declining public ethics.”¹⁴ The Caodai’s millenarian mission was to re-establish Vietnamese values in society, values which had deteriorated during colonial rule. It is certainly possible that Caodai adherents with this in mind coordinated their religious goal to restore Vietnamese ideals with a desire to overcome French oppression and establish national independence.

In 1933, scholar Paul Mus referred to the Caodai’s synchronization of religious and political goals as being part of “an enduring indigenous substratum” in Vietnam, a phenomenon that corresponded to nationalism’s valuing of cultural endurance against colonial suppression.¹⁵ While Caodaism created a uniquely Vietnamese identity for its followers, the desire to protect and promote that identity resonated with nationalist goals to overcome colonial influence. The Caodai held their own vision of independence, which proposed the reinstatement of the monarchy

¹³“New Religion Spurs Indo-Chinese Rising”, Special Cable to *The New York Times* (Feb 28, 1930), 9.

¹⁴ Werner, 6, 14; Blagov, 82.

¹⁵ Philip Taylor, *Goddess on the Rise: Pilgrimage and Popular Religion in Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 33.

and the betterment of peasant life through religious salvation and social programs.¹⁶ The religious group operated with objectives that were synchronous to the nationalist movement, but followers never surrendered their Caodaist goals or identity for nationalist ones. In their vision and pursuit of Vietnam's independence, the Caodai always remained distinctly Caodai.

The movement gained real political momentum in 1938 when another spirit message communicated that the Caodai had to seek support from Japan to liberate the country and restore the monarchy. Reinstating Prince Cuong De was a central part of realizing the age of renovation and an alliance with Japan became increasingly attractive as the Caodaists faced continual persecution under colonial rule.

Although the French granted Caodaism full recognition in 1939, from 1940 to 1941 temples were closed, adepts were detained, and leaders, including Pope Pham Cong Tac, were arrested.¹⁷ The need for a Japanese alliance was clear. In 1943, Tran Quang Vinh, the Caodai military commander and religious leader, signed a program of cooperation with Japan, aiming to ensure the survival of Caodaism and to achieve their vision of Vietnamese independence.

Although benefits were obtained by both sides—the Caodaists received protection from the French and the Japanese amassed military recruits for their World War II efforts—the alliance did not result in independence for the Vietnamese.¹⁸ The situation became increasingly complicated when Caodaist forces were entangled in the coup de force executed by the Japanese on March 9, 1945, which brought an end to French rule. The independence this victory initially seemed to promise went unrealized. The Japanese did not reinstate the Prince but instead

¹⁶ Tran My-Van, "Japan and Vietnam's Caodaists: A Wartime Relationship (1939-45)", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 27.1 (1996): 181.

¹⁷ Blagov, 82-84, 91.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

retained Emperor Bao Dai, a decision which ignored the nationalists and Caodai alike.¹⁹ The Caodaists saw their vision of independence disintegrate as the alliance came to its final termination with the surrender of the Japanese on August 15, ending World War II and beginning the scramble for control over southern Vietnam.

Despite the creation of the Empire of Vietnam under Bao Dai in May, the communist Viet Minh entered from the north in the summer of 1945 to race for power against local political and religious groups. On August 17, the Caodai joined other anti-Viet Minh groups to form the Mat Tran Quoc Gia Thong Nhut, or the National Unified Front, in the hopes of coping with Vietnam's unstable political situation.²⁰ Nevertheless, victory ultimately went to the Viet Minh, and in September, Ho Chi Minh established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in Hanoi, marking communist takeover. With the return of the French in 1946, however, any notions of forthcoming stability were shattered. Though the French recognized the Republic as a free state in 1946, it was an entirely superficial arrangement. By the end of the year, conflicting interests between the French and the Viet Minh led to the breakout of the First Indochinese War, and Caodai hopes for independence were dashed again.

From 1946 to 1954, the Caodai were under fire from both the French colonists and the Viet Minh. Caodai leader Tran Quang Vinh was accused by the Communists of assisting the enemy and supporting a failing monarchy, which caused him to remove himself from politics. After later being arrested and tortured by the French, Vinh agreed to a Franco-Caodaist alliance.²¹ Vinh's willingness to align with a recent enemy exemplified the adaptability of the Caodai, since he took the necessary measures that would ensure the survival of the movement.

¹⁹ Tran My-Van, "Japan and Vietnam's Caodaists: A Wartime Relationship (1939-45)", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 27.1 (1996), 187-188.

²⁰ Vu Ngu Chieu, "The Other Side of the 1945 Vietnamese Revolution: The Empire of Viet-Nam (March-August 1945)". *The Journal of Asian Studies* 45.2 (1986), 295, 312.

²¹ Chieu, 191-192.

The Viet Minh, however, did not sympathize with such ideological flexibility and viewed the alliance as a betrayal of the goals of nationalism; by 1954, they had killed 40,000.²² As war raged throughout Vietnam, the balance between protecting the Caodai identity and pursuing the nation's freedom became increasingly precarious.

However, even following decades of persecution, the Caodai persevered. After signing a formal alliance against the Viet Minh with the Hoa Hao Buddhist movement in 1947, the two groups covertly controlled over half the rural population of the south. Sergei Blagov, a former Soviet correspondent in Vietnam, proposed the peasant population continued to be drawn to the Caodai as a means of survival because of “the dual appeals of religious and material security that were increasingly correlated to the goals of nationalism.”²³ After enduring years of oppression, the Caodai transformed into a military and political force that continued to provide adherents with a sense of security they could not find elsewhere.

The Geneva Conferences in 1954 marked the end of the First Indochinese War. During a news conference on May 25, in the midst of the agreements, John Foster Dulles, the United States Secretary of State, discussed the conditions for appropriate intervention and claimed that the United States would only enter Indochina on “defense of liberty and independence and freedom.”²⁴ Despite the values the United States espoused, Congress refused to sign the agreements. The Geneva Accords were therefore passed without endorsement from the United States, and Vietnam was granted official independence from France and divided into North and South at the 17th parallel.

Ho Chi Minh continued his rule in the North, while the United States persisted with its

²² Blagov, 95.

²³ *Ibid.*, 99.

²⁴ United States. Department of State. “Indochina – Conditions for United States Direct Intervention in Indochina: Transcript of a News Conference of the Secretary of State, May 25, 1954 (Excerpt)”. By John Foster Dulles (Washington: GPO, 1957), 1.

battle against Communism by placing all of its support behind the French-educated and Catholic Ngo Dinh Diem, the new President of South Vietnam. Unaccountable to the Geneva Accords, the United States was free to ensure the elections scheduled for 1956 in South Vietnam were never held, which guaranteed Diem's rule, repressed the possibility of a Communist win, and denied Vietnamese unification. Despite the United States' desire for the Vietnamese to understand that independence was worth fighting for, by supporting Diem, the United States effectively prevented Caodaists from realizing their autonomy.²⁵

Following the Geneva Accords, the Caodai, along with the Hoa Hao and Binh Xuyen, were at the height of their power and represented the most potent political forces in Vietnam. Diem's government had limited authority against the Caodai and Hoa Hao influence in rural areas, while the Binh Xuyen controlled the prostitution, narcotics, and gambling syndicates that dominated Saigon.²⁶ Working towards common goals with these two groups, the Caodai became associated with underground operations that were corrupting the Vietnamese ideals that the sect's millenarian belief system sought to restore. Arguably, this is the most extreme example of the sect's adaptability. Understanding the necessary steps to maintain power, and in the hopes of discovering Vietnamese independence, the Caodai engaged in the very activities they had hoped to eradicate in Vietnam.

Despite American support, Diem barely survived the sect crisis of 1955. Although he brought Caodai and Hoa Hao representatives into his cabinet, the sects joined forces in an active assault against the government when Diem refused to give the two groups autonomy or negotiate with the Binh Xuyen. In an effort to legitimize his authority, Diem struck back and by March

²⁵ SarDesai, 68; United States, 1.

²⁶ Robert D. Schulzinger, "The Postwar Political-Religious Landscape in Vietnam", *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 80.

1955, the streets of Saigon were a war zone.²⁷ In a rare exception to his usual refusal of American advice, Diem followed the direction of Colonel Edward G. Lansdale, who bribed leaders of the Hoa Hao and Caodai with CIA funds. To the surprise of all parties, Diem successfully overcame the Bin Xuyen forces, driving them back to Cholon and pushing the Caodai and Bao Boa underground. Full American support returned, and despite being seen as doomed to fail days earlier, Diem was believed to have saved South Vietnam from the Vietminh, and, more pertinently, from the influence of adaptable and influential religious sects like the Caodai.²⁸

Diem's policies were dictatorial and served to suppress any and all forms of religious and political dissent, and the Caodai were seen as a particularly crucial target. In 1955, Diem ordered the occupation of the Holy See, crippling the movement's political activity. In early 1956, 1,000 Caodaist troops remained of the 25,000 in 1954, while another 3,400 followers were arrested between 1956 and 1958.

Under conditions of suppression until the anti-Diem coup in 1963, the Caodai was no longer the force of nationalistic opposition it had been in the 1930s. Although the movement maintained a following of 498,000 members in former Cochinchina and another 60,000 in the North, spiritualism, occultism, and superstitious phenomena were condemned by the government in 1962 to ensure the modernization of the state. With the fundamental practices of their religion denounced, and their nation caught in the Second Indochinese War from 1965 to 1973, Caodaists had increasing difficulty in gaining new converts, and the Caodai's nationalistic momentum

²⁷ George C. Herring, "Our Offspring: Nation-Building in South Vietnam, 1954-1961", *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam 1950-1975*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 1979), 52-53.

²⁸ Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History: The First Complete Account of Vietnam at War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 222; Herring, 54.

faded.²⁹

After Saigon fell to Ho Chi Minh on April 30, South Vietnam was under official Communist control. On July 2, 1976, North and South Vietnam were unified to form the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Yet again, Vietnamese independence was not as the Caodai had envisioned it. Under the rule of the Republic, religion was banned throughout the country. The Caodai were still able to offer considerable resistance to the government and as a result, they were persecuted severely. Four of the head dignitaries were executed and the Holy See was seized. The Caodai's mission to restore Vietnam to its former glory became impossible. Under ever increasing oppression, many adherents chose to flee, seeking refuge and religious freedom in the West.³⁰

The Caodai's pursuit of nationalism had great ambition in its aim to institute the age of renovation, but the movement never succeeded in establishing such an era. Differences in colonial impact, social and economic conditions, and rates of class formation made Communism and its interpretation of nationalism more popular in Central and Northern Vietnam. While the Caodai maintained a functional administration and held practical goals such as reinstating the monarchy and implementing social programs, fragmentation within the leadership as well as continual violent persecution made the realization of a Caodaist Vietnam even more difficult. Though the Caodai united their followers behind a common vision of Vietnam's independence, due to its limited regional following and both internal and external upheaval, they ultimately failed in making that vision a reality.

Although the Caodai did not succeed in their ambition to establish the independence of Vietnam, it is tenable to claim that their fundamental religious objective was achieved. The

²⁹ Blagov, 107-108, 111-112; Taylor, 36.

³⁰ "Vietnam: Problems", *The Library of Congress Country Studies*, (Dec. 1987), 1; Kislenco, 431; Blagov, 185.

impetus for Caodaism was to synthesize world religions and create a path to unification and reconciliation between the East and West; a mission that was not limited by Vietnam's borders. In fact, the movement of Caodaists to Western nations was interpreted as fate for the religion's dissemination, a chance to share their unique identity and further unification.³¹

The success of this mission can be seen in the Caodai's sustained following, both in Vietnam and around the world. In 1997, Caodaism was officially recognized by the Vietnamese government and in 2008 there were approximately six million Caodai adherents, half of whom resided in Vietnam, making Caodaism the third largest religion in the country after Buddhism and Christianity. The Caodai continued to evolve and adapt to changing circumstances, allowing the distinctly Vietnamese movement to flourish on a global scale. While the Caodai's assertion of nationalist resistance did not achieve the independence of Vietnam, the Caodai never lost sight of how their religion could be used for the creative fashioning of a new identity, not only for individual adherents, but for all of Vietnam.³²

³¹ Werner, 59, 7; Phan, 7.

³² Kislenko, 431; Taylor, 33.

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