

Rice Paddy to Wheatfield: Caodaism in America's Heartland

By

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Lyall Lee Ford

Submitted to the graduate degree program in Global and International Studies and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Date approved: April 27, 2011

### **Abstract:**

Caodaism is a new religious movement which combines elements of the belief systems of many of the world's religions. Created in 1926 in Vietnam, Caodaism grew to become the third largest religion in Vietnam in only a few decades. Today, there are some three million practicing Caodaists in the world, many who have been spread across the globe as result of the diaspora following the end of the Vietnamese-American War and the Fall of Saigon in 1975. This documentary film project explores Caodaism from its origins in colonial Vietnam to its emergence in the United States; exploring the history, beliefs, rituals and customs of this little-known religion.

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## **Acknowledgements and Dedication**

This project would not be possible if not for the help of a number of individuals whom I owe a sincere debt of gratitude. First, I'm thankful to Dr. Hal Wert, Professor of History at the Kansas City Arts Institute for encouraging me to undertake this research project, agreeing to chair my thesis committee, and for offering suggestions and encouragements along the way. A special thank you also goes to Dr. Eric Hanley for agreeing to serve on my thesis committee, and for his guidance and help through this process. Appreciation goes to Dr. Theodore A. Wilson for serving on my thesis committee, and for also providing advice and mentorship early on during my start in the program. I also owe gratitude to Noel Rasor, the Global and International Studies Program Advisor, who provided me much assistance during my time in the program. I'm appreciative of Dr. Bob Beatty, Professor of Political Science at Washburn University whom I had the pleasure of traveling Vietnam with during the summer of 2008, where I first discovered Caodaism. Dr. Beatty has been a source of encouragement since my time as an undergraduate student, and I sincerely appreciate his mentorship over the years. Much thanks goes to Dr. Miguel Leatham, Instructor of Anthropology at Texas Christian University, whom while agreeing to be interviewed for this project also provided me with great insights into the Caodaism movement. I am indebted to the Cao Dai communities of Kansas and Texas who very graciously allowed me to visit and observe their traditions. Thank you all for your assistance and your very warm hospitality. In particular, I would like to especially recognize Dr. Hoi Luong of Thánh-thất Cao-đài Houston for facilitating my visit to the Houston temple, and for answering so many of my questions. I'd also like to recognize the Rev. Hai Nguyen of Thánh-thất Cao-đài Wichita who was very helpful and also allowed me to attend the inauguration of the Wichita temple. Finally, I'm grateful for the assistance of Mr. Minhdao Le of Thánh Thất & Điện Thờ Phật Mẫu Dallas Fort Worth who facilitated my visit to the temples in the Dallas/Fort Worth area and was very generous with his time in answering questions.

I would like to dedicate this project to parents, John and Julie Ford, as well as my wife Margaret Schrader-Ford. To my parents, I thank you for all of the support, encouragement and love that you have given me throughout the years. Thank you for instilling in me the value of higher education and for always encouraging me to seek out and study my curiosities. To my wife, thank you for your love, your enduring patience, as well as your kind encouragements and suggestions during the course of this project.

## **Introduction:**

Born in Vietnam in 1926, Caodaism is a syncretic religion combining elements of the belief systems of Confucianism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Taoism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. With some three-million followers in Vietnam, Cao Dai is the third largest religion in the country behind Buddhism and Catholicism. Cao Dai means “high place,” symbolic of the place where God dwells. Central to their teachings is the idea that all of the world’s religions are different manifestations of the same god. According to the adept, Cao Dai exists to reconcile the differences in the world’s religions in an effort promote peace.

One of the first western accounts of the of the Cao Dai religion came from the British journalist and author Graham Greene; who wrote about his encounter with the religion in his memoirs, and also included a depiction of the faith in his novel, *The Quiet American*. Greene’s account of Cao Dai is that of a bewildered outsider looking in:

“Of all France's allies in Indo-China, the most astonishing are the Caodaists, members of a religious sect founded around 1920. Their capital, which they call ‘The Holy See,’ is Tay Ninh, some 80 kilometres from Saigon, where their Pope lives surrounded by cardinals of both sexes. At the entrance to the fantastic, technicolour cathedral are hung the portraits of three minor saints of the Caodaist religion: Dr. Sun Yat Sen, Trang Trinh, a primitive Vietnamese poet, and Victor Hugo, attired in the uniform of a member of the Academie Francaise with a halo round his tricorn hat. In the nave of the cathedral, in the full Asiatic splendour of a Walt Disney fantasy, pastel dragons coil about the columns and pulpit; from every stained-glass window the great eye of God follows one, an enormous serpent

forms the papal throne and high up under the arches are the effigies of the three major saints: Buddha, Confucius, and Christ displaying his Sacred Heart.”

My own first personal experience with Cao Dai came during a trip to Vietnam in the summer of 2008. Like Greene, I was awe-struck when I arrived to the sights and sounds of the Holy See Temple in Tay Ninh. Upon arriving, I was greeted by statuettes of Jesus, Buddha, Mohammad, and Confucius hanging out together high above an altar. At the other ends of the temple, a giant mural of Victor Hugo. The reason for the presence of any of these figures was not apparent to me at the time. All the while, hundreds of followers chanted prayers between an intricate series of bows in front of the giant altar. I did not understand the significance of the rituals, or rather really anything at all about the religion –but I wanted to find out more.

Upon returning back home, I did some reading up on Cao Dai. I was surprised to find that in just two decades after its 1926 birth, Cao Dai had managed to attract over a million devotees. Moreover, I found that Caodaism was a major socio-political force during the French-Colonial and Vietnamese-American War periods in Vietnam. With an impressive administrative hierarchy, Caodaism had served as a sort of quasi-government in many of the villages of rural Indochina. The Caodaists even had its own military forces, which controlled over one half of the rural population of the South during the height of its power in 1950 (Blagov, 2001 23-25). Also as I investigated Cao Dai further, I was surprised to find out that there were Cao Dai communities all over the United States –a result of the diaspora following the end of the Vietnamese-American War and the fall of Saigon. Wanting to learn more about these groups had adapted to life in the United States, I contacted Cao Dai communities in Wichita, KS, the Dallas/Ft. Worth, TX area,

as well as Houston, TX. As a result of those first initial interactions, I decided to embark on this documentary film project.

### **Structure of Documentary Film Project**

This documentary film project examines the origins and history of the Cao Dai religion from its humble beginnings during the French Colonial period, to its eventual rise as a major socio-political force as well as Vietnam's third largest religion, its persecution by the French Colonial, Diem and later Communist Vietnamese governments, (resulting in the jailing and massacre of many of its followers) and finally its worldwide exportation by the post Vietnam War Diaspora. The documentary examines the Cao Dai religion through the personal experiences and observations of Vietnamese-American Cao Dai practitioners living in Wichita, KS, Houston Texas, as well as the Dallas-Ft. Worth, TX area; who explain how their faith has sustained them through war, and as refugees arriving in a new land with different customs and traditions. While the film project seeks to provide the viewer with a general overview of the movement, it also attempts to answer some questions. First, what accounts for the syncretic nature of Caodaism? Secondly, how has Caodaism adapted to life in the United States? This film hopes to be able to give the viewer some insights into these questions.<sup>1</sup>

In regards to style, this documentary project uses a combination of expository and observational techniques.<sup>2</sup> Narratives are employed to explain to the viewer the overall context and historical background of the movement, as well as relate ideas and observations. Video coverage of ceremonies and personal interactions assume more of

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<sup>1</sup> For a transcript of the documentary film, see Appendix A.

<sup>2</sup> For more on documentary filmmaking style, see Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor's book, Cross-Cultural Filmmaking: A Handbook for Making Documentary and Ethnographic Films and Videos (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).



an observational style. Interviews with Cao Dai leaders and adepts are featured throughout the documentary, as well as commentary by an anthropologist who specializes in the study of new religious movements who has studied Cao Dai communities in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

## **Historical Overview of Caodaism**

### **Origins:**

While Caodaism can be seen as somewhat of a new religious movement, the ideas and traditions which have informed and influenced its development are not. While Caodaists tend to emphasize their religion as completely new from 1926 on, the origins of the religion has roots that extend deep into the Sino-Vietnamese tradition, and that it must be seen from the context of earlier religious movements. As Stephen Denney shows, the relationship between religions is very intertwined with Vietnamese society. The Vietnamese worldview of most Vietnamese is a mixture of animist beliefs (especially the veneration of ancestors) with an amalgam of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. This shared religious foundation along with a common national heritage has informed the Vietnamese national identity (137). When Caodaism surfaced, the “Three Teachings” amalgam of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism had an established history in Vietnam. In 1247, The Tran dynasty initiated examinations in the “Three Teachings” for those hoping to join the civil service. In the eighteenth century, the Confucian scholar Ngo Thi Si established the Altar of Three Religions where Confucius, Buddha and Lao Tzu were worshiped under the same altar (Blagov 2001, 2).

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<sup>3</sup> For a transcript of the interview with Dr. Miguel Leatham, Instructor of Anthropology at Texas Christian University, see Appendix B.

Caodaism's popularity must be in part due to its syncretic incorporation of other Vietnamese religions. As Victor L. Oliver (1976) shows, the concept of religious syncretism was commonly acknowledged in Vietnam before the advent of Caodaism. It was common for the religious inclined in Vietnam to incorporate a synthesis of the three major Asian religions: Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. In addition, native Vietnamese animist beliefs were also merged with these traditional Asian religions. Not one religion was considered mutually exclusive; rather beliefs from one particular religion were often combined with others. For the average Vietnamese, this religious patchwork of beliefs presented no conflict. In fact, the idea of religious exclusivity, or the idea that one religion owns the truth was considered a foreign concept to most Vietnamese. As Thich Nhat Hanh explains (in Oliver):

A Vietnamese who professes to be a Confucian does not deny his belief in Buddhism, nor must a convinced Buddhist declare that he disbelieves Confucianism. That is why we cannot say with accuracy how many Vietnamese are Buddhist. When we examine the beliefs of a typical peasant, we find elements of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism intimately mixed together, along with the other elements belonging to native beliefs that existed before the three great religions were introduced into Vietnam (25).

Just as the native Vietnamese religions were important in the development of Caodaism, the practice of spiritism would also influence and shape Caodaist teachings and doctrine. *Spiritism*, the practice of attempting to communicate with spirits beyond the material world had for a long time existed in both Asia and Europe. Furthermore, the popularity of the writings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century spiritists Kardec and Durville in Europe

eventually found its way to Vietnam. These writings became popular particularly among the Vietnamese elite, whom would experiment in Spiritism by holding séances.

According to Tran My-Van, (2000) many of the native elite saw the séance as way of secretly venting their collective discontent about French colonial rule, as well as perhaps a means of receiving answers about what to do about it. Séance sessions became popularized as rumors of miracles and intriguing stories of spirit contact spread (5).

### **Beliefs and Religious Practices**

The literal translation of Cao Dai from Vietnamese means “high place” or “high platform,” and symbolizes the place from where God reigns over existence. Caodaists also refer to their religion as *Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do*, or The Third Great Universal Amnesty of God. This is in reference to the three historical revelations of God. Caodaists believe that God decided to reveal itself again through a third and final revelation by establishing the new religion of Cao Dai. Caodaists say that the Third Amnesty establishes a new path to salvation for humanity, and believe its core goal is the unity of all the religions of the world. Furthermore, they believe that God is the father of all beings and the creator of all the world's religions. Caodaists contend that God has manifested itself at different times and places through various religions throughout history (Hoskins 2007, 7).

Caodaists revere a pantheon of nine deities. First among the many is the Supreme Being Cao Dai, represented by the Eye of God present atop of the traditional Cao Dai altar. On a second level below there is Buddha, Lao Tse, Confucius, Li Tai Pe, (a Chinese poet) Quan Am (or “Guan Yin,” the Chinese bodhisattva of compassion) and the Chinese warrior Quan Cong. On the third level stands Jesus Christ. At a fourth level, Khuong

Thai Cong represents the Geniist traditions of ancestor, hero, and spirit veneration. Below this pantheon of deities are the numerous saints of the religion: Victor Hugo, Sun Yat-Sen, Descartes, Joan of Arc, Lenin, Shakespeare, and Louis Pasteur among many others. The saints of Cao Dai aren't chosen through a lengthy canonization process as they are in the Roman Catholic tradition; rather they are spirits who have chosen to reveal themselves during Cao Dai séances to communicate the proper direction of the religion. It is through these spirit messages communicated to mediums between 1925 and 1935 that the scriptures of Caodaism are derived (Hoskins 2007, 12).

### **Historical Precursors to the Development of Caodaism**

The Cao Dai religion began against the backdrop of the nationalist and pro-independence movements in colonial French-Indochina. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, France slowly gained control in Vietnam through a string of treaties signed by the Imperial Nguyen Court in 1862, 1867, and 1872. Later, further military and political incursion by France in Indochina at last ended Vietnamese independence with the signing of the Patenotre Treaty of 1884. The consequences of French rule on the Vietnamese were profound. Those in the Vietnamese government were either purged or made into puppets by their French overlords. Furthermore, a repressive system of taxation ravaged the local economy. A nationalist rebellion resulted, to which the French responded to heavy-handedly with executions, imprisonment, and exile. In 1916, there was an effort to restore the Imperial Nguyen family to power, led by the emperor Duy Tan. It did not succeed however, and the emperor was forced by the French to abdicate and then was sent into exile. Thus, it was in this atmosphere of popular rebellion and suppression by the French that the Cao Dai religion began. As political organizing was forbidden during

this time, some Vietnamese elites (including what would become the first Cao Dai adepts) sought religious and spiritual pursuits. These religious gatherings provided participants a safe way to associate with one another, while also providing cover for political activities in a way very similar to the Fa Long Gun movement today in China (My-Van 2000, 1-3). Thus, while Caodaism would later become astonishing popular in the villages among the peasants, it was largely started by the Vietnamese elite. As Janet Hoskins (2007) shows, Caodaism was started by a group of young, politically minded civil servants who held various positions in the French colonial bureaucracy. This group of intellectuals had studied at the best French language schools. As civil servants in the colonial government, they learned democratic principles, yet were of course unable to practice them in their homeland. It was in 1925, a year of mass demonstrations and anti-colonial protests that this group of bureaucrats began meeting and holding séances in the hopes of receiving guidance from the great intellectual minds of history. They began experimenting with different forms of spirit communication; utilizing those methods developed the European spiritist Alain Kardec as well as the age-old local Taoist methods of automatic writing (8-9).

### **Ngo Minh Chieu and the Establishment of a New Religious Movement**

Caodaists consider the founder of Caodaism to be Ngo Van Chieu, (also sometimes called “Ngo Minh Chieu”) a Vietnamese official in the French colonial civil service. Born in 1878 in the town of Cholon in South Vietnam, Chieu was the son of a rice-mill worker. At the age of seven, Chieu’s parents moved to Hanoi to look for employment. Chieu was left behind to live with his aunt whom he would stay with for the rest of his childhood. With the help of a family friend, he was able to attend French

schools, and thus was able to qualify for the French civil service (Smith 1970, 337-338). In 1899, Chieu qualified for the French administrative service and he was given a post in the immigration department. In 1903, he was transferred to a position in the office of the Indochina Governor General. He then held a string of different posts in the French administration, finally culminating in his appointment to country chief Central Ministerial Building where he served until his retirement in 1931 (Farid 2009, 9).

Chieu's first revelation of the spirit known as Cao Dai came in 1920 during his tenure as Governor of Phu Quoc, an island province in the Gulf of Thailand. One day during his daily meditation practice, an entity calling itself Cao Dai was revealed to Chieu. This being informed Chieu that all the world's religions should return back to its one original form from which they came, and that this new message should be spread across the world. One week later, the apparition of a huge eye in the sky appeared to Chieu while he rested in his hammock. Two days later, Chieu again had a vision of the eye, and he was sufficiently convinced that this symbol was what God wanted to represent the new religion (Beck and Bui 2000, 26-27). Having been granted permission to worship Cao Dai in a material form, Chieu made his vision of the divine eye the symbolic representation of this new religion. Later on, Chieu was called back to Saigon where he would recruit the first converts to the religion (Gobron 1950, 19-20). The first Cao Dai temple was established by Chieu and his converts in Cau Kho in 1925. This group was infiltrated by members of the French surete police force, but they were so impressed with the religion that they confessed to the Caodaists and then themselves became devotees (Blagov 1999, 9).

Also in 1925, a different group of civil servants (said to be separate and

independent of Chieu's Cau Kho group) started meeting to experiment with a method of spirit communication called table-tipping (Beck and Bui 2000, 27). Over time, the men honed their ability to receive messages from spirits. During the course of their sessions, many different spirits would arrive, giving messages in Vietnamese, Chinese, French and English. Among those spirits who revealed themselves during these séances were heroes, partisans, family members, friends and strangers. Word of these experiences reached others, who were curious to attend the séances themselves (Oliver 1976, 36-37). During one of these séances, a spirit introduced itself as "AAA." This spirit was said to have amazing knowledge and outstanding insights. As the séances progressed AAA suggested that the group replace their crude method of spirit communication with the *corbeille a bec*, literary a "basket on a beak" in English.<sup>4</sup> Then during a session on Christmas Eve of 1925, AAA revealed itself to be the Supreme Being Cao Dai, proclaiming:

Be joyful tonight on this the anniversary of my appearance to teach the religion in the West. Your allegiance to me brings much happiness to me. This house will be filled with my grace. You will see more miracles which will lead you to further honor me...For some time I have used the symbol AAA to lead you into the religious life. Soon you must help me establish the religion. Have you seen my humility? Imitate me so that you may genuinely claim to be religious men (Tran Thai Chan in Oliver 1967, 38).

So began the establishment of Caodaism as a religious group. Also around this time, Le Van Trung, a former member of the Council of Cochinchina attended a séance.

During the session, the spirit of the ancient Chinese scholar Ly Thai Bach revealed

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<sup>4</sup> The *corbeille a bec* was the traditional séance communication tool of Chinese Taoist mediums used in automatic writing. It was made of a wooden basket with a stylus on the end in which the user would supposedly write messages from the spirit world.

himself and told Trung that he was the incarnation of the Immortal Ly Thiet Quai. The spirit told Trung that he should prepare for his future religious role. From then on, Trung, who was said to be addicted to opium, quit the habit cold turkey without experiencing symptoms of withdrawal. Trung also abstained from consuming alcohol or eating meat. Later on, the group of Spiritists in Saigon who had witnessed the original Christmas Eve revelation of the spirit of Cao Dai (known as the *Pho loan* group) were told by Cao Dai in a revelation that they should invite Trung to join their activities. Thus Trung joined the steadily growing *Pho loan*. At the end of 1925, Cao Dai sent the group out to meet with Ngo Van Chieu. During this meeting, Cao Dai called for the creation of a new religion to be established to serve all humanity. From hence on, the group of adepts went to work designing (with the guidance and dictates of Cao Dai) the religious hierarchy of the new religion. This hierarchy was remarkably similar to that of the Catholic Church, -with its equivalent of a Pope at the helm, and various levels of Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, Priests, lay dignitaries and so forth. In the position of Giau-Tong, or Pope, Cao Dai commanded that Ngo Van Chieu should serve as the new religion's leader. Chieu however declined to follow the order, seeing it as something of a religious test. Believing that the power and the position of the position as potentially threatening to his spiritual attainment, Chieu chose to leave the *Pho loan* group in order to continue to cultivate his own spiritual awareness. As a result of this decision, Le Van Trung would later be made by Cao Dai the first Giau-Tong of the new religion (Beck and Bui 2000, 28-31).

### **Inauguration of Caodaism**

Wishing to be permitted by the French authorities to openly organize the new religion, the leaders of Caodaism made an official declaration during a day of festivities



on October 7, 1926. The petition, sent to the Governor of Cochinchina, was signed by 28 officials, and also included a list of 247 signatures of those persons attending the announcing the creation of Caodaism (Gobron 1950, 28). Then on November 18, 1926, the religion of Caodaism was inaugurated in a ceremony attended by French officials and military officers, as well as a purported 50,000 followers and onlookers. During the ceremony, members of Caodaism's leadership hierarchy were introduced to the public in their new ceremonial garb. Shortly afterwards, the leadership purchased land at Long Thanh, Tay Ninh in order to build a permanent temple and establish their Holy See. The money for the land was provided by Madame Lam Thi Thanh, who was later vested as a cardinal in the religion (Oliver 1976, 47-48).

### **Expansion and Proselytization in the Villages, Vietnamese Nationalism and Cooperation with the Japanese**

By the mid-1930's, Cao Dai's organizational apparatus had spread from Tay Ninh to several villages throughout Cochinchina. In many of these villages, the Cao Dai administration conducted many civil responsibilities: dispensing justice and organizing community projects (Hill 1971, 330-331). During this period, the Caodaist province of Tay Ninh was highly autonomous. The Holy See administration levied taxes and administered hospitals, schools, orphanages, a number of business enterprises, and even had its own army and police force (Hoskins 2007, 12). The rising influence of Caodaism in the villages caught the notice of the French, who concerned about its growing influence and power base sought to restrain its activities in the north and center of the country. As a result, Caodaism came to be concentrated mostly in the south of Vietnam. As Pope, Pham Cong Tac was very successful in expanding the religion's

economic and political power base. In 1939, during a pro-independence campaign, Tac publicly gave support to Japan-backed Prince Cuong De effort to restore the Nguyen Dynasty. As a result, numerous leaders of several local Cao Dai branches threw their support behind Cuong De and joined the pro-Japanese independence movement. The pro-Japanese sentiment among Caodaists at this time was evident in the séance communications being revealed during this period. For example, before the arrival Japanese forces in 1940, spiritist messages predicted that the Japanese would overthrow French rule in Indochina, and that a nationalist government would emerge as a result with many Cao Dai leaders at its helm (My-Van 1996, 181-182).

### **Conflict with the French and the Viet Minh**

While the Caodaist prophecy that Indochina would be invaded by the Japanese was fulfilled, it did not result in the establishment of an independent Vietnamese government. In September of 1940, the Japanese Imperial Army invaded Indochina. However, rather than installing a nationalist government headed by Price Cuong De as was assumed by many in the independence movement, the Japanese instead sought negotiations with the Vichy French regime. Wishing to retain Indochina as a supply line to further conquests in Asia, the Japanese concluded that that it was in their best interests to seek concessions with the French, and allowed them to retain administrative control over their colonies. In May of 1941, Japanese forces moved into Indochina, yet this did not deter the French from attempting to suppress nationalist and religious organizations. Several Cao Dai temples were ravaged. In July 1941, the Holy See was occupied by French troops, and Caodaists were given 24 hours to leave Tay Ninh (My-Van 1996, 182-184). Pham Cong Tac and other key leaders were arrested, and exiled to the French

province of Madagascar. In 1942, Caodai Bishop Tran Quang Vinh left his temple in Phenom Phenh to return to Vietnam in order to negotiate an alliance with the Kempeitei, the Japanese secret police (Beck and Bui 2000, 84-85). The Japanese agreed to provide the Caodaists with aid in return for their support against the French. The aid included the arming and training of a defensive army, known as the Caodai Military Forces. This force, along with other nationalist forces participated in the Japanese-led coup against the French in March 1945. The Caodaists' cooperation with the Japanese infuriated the Viet Minh, who viewed the Japanese intentions in Vietnam as disingenuous, believing that Japan was destined to become another colonial occupier. After 1945, the Viet Minh began attacking Caodaist communities, killing some 2,990 adepts in central Vietnam, including women and children. Another 2,000 were killed in the Tay Ninh region. Because of these attacks, the Caodai army was allowed to be maintained as a defensive force to protect the people against the Viet Minh (Hoskins 2007, 91-92).

### **Post-War and Immigration to the United States**

The fall of South Vietnam saw an influx of Vietnamese refugees to the United States. With the fall of Saigon, 130,000 Vietnamese were brought to the United States for resettlement. This first wave of immigration was followed by the exodus of boat people who escaped Vietnam illegally from 1975 to 1985. Conditions for those who escaped by boat were severe, and many were victims of theft, rape and violence by pirates, while also having to languish in refugee camps as they waited for repatriation. An estimated 700,000 Vietnamese made their way to the United States as refugees. Another 200,000 Vietnamese arrived after 1980 as immigrants under programs like the Orderly Departure Program and the Humanitarian Operation. The Orderly Departure Program was created

by the UN High Commission for Refugees to prevent dangerous illegal departures. The Humanitarian Operation was created in 1987 in order repatriate political prisoners who had served more than three years in reeducation camps. Today in the United States, there are more than two million Vietnamese-Americans. Of these, around 20,000 are practicing Caodaists, although the number of former and non-practicing Caodaists could be just as high (Hoskins 2007, 16).

### **Caodaism under Communist Rule**

Those Caodaists who did not leave Vietnam in the wake of the fall of Saigon in 1975 had to contend with the new regime. After the takeover of South Vietnam, Hanoi was eager to disrupt the influence of all religious organizations in order to disrupt their power as autonomous socio-political communities, as well as subordinate them to the new political ideology of Communist Vietnam. Thus Caodaism, like most religious communities in Vietnam were viewed by Hanoi in mostly negative terms (Blagov 2001, 151-152). In 1975, as communist troops took over South Vietnam, communist authorities posted a proclamation which condemned the Cao Dai religion as *anti-revolutionary*. Moreover, all of Cao Dai's high officials were condemned as traitors to the revolution. Temples were boarded up, and the hospitals, schools, orphanages operated by Caodaists were nationalized along with other property owned by the religion. Many of the Caodai leadership were put in prison or re-education camps. In 1984, some eight thousand Caodaists were made to take courses which reviewed the state penal code (Blagov 2001, 120-121). The new government berated Caodaism as being a hodge-podge of diverse doctrines intended for mass consumption, and called it “profoundly opportunist.” (Blagov 2001, 151-152). The communist government shut down the séances at Tay Ninh,

effectively freezing the ability of the religion to elect new officials. Since all administrative positions in Caodaism from Pope to priest are approved by divine decree, no new positions in the hierarchy are filled once they are vacated. Thus, as their clergy die off, there is no mechanism to allow for lower clergy to fill those ranks. In addition to the banning of the séances at Tay Ninh, much of the administrative hierarchy has been infiltrated by government personnel (Personal interview, 2010).

In September 2004, the US State Department criticized Vietnam's lack of religious tolerance, calling it a “Country of Particular Concern” in regards to its intolerance of religious freedoms and history of forced renunciations of faith. While Vietnam denied the allegations, it sought negotiations on the matter, presumably to avoid economic sanctions. In May 2005, Vietnam concluded an agreement with US in which it committed to ending the practice of forced renunciations of faith, and also enacted reforms to improve religious freedoms. While religious freedoms have improved in Vietnam since the 70's and 80's, the regime is still suspicious of religious organizations, and continues to crack down on religious leaders or groups that it deems dissident. Moreover, the regime continues to interfere in the internal affairs of religious organizations (Denney, 150-151).

### **Cao Dai Communities in the United States**

Caodaism's global exportation after the fall of Saigon in 1975 saw the establishment of the religion in many countries outside of Vietnam. Today, Caodaism is a transnational religion and is practiced in some 50 countries worldwide, with the largest communities in Australia, Cambodia, the United States, Canada, France and Germany (Stuertz, 2002). Today in the United States, there are Cao Dai communities in fifteen

states and some thirty cities, most of which are concentrated in cities with large Vietnamese-American communities. California has the largest number of Cao Dai adepts, with Cao Dai centers in Redlands, Anaheim, Garden Grove, Westminster, San Jose, Perris, San Jose, and San Diego (Centre for Studies in Caodaism Website, 2010). Texas also has several Cao Dai communities, with two temples in Houston, two temples in Dallas, one temple in San Antonio, and a small group of followers in Austin (Stuertz 2002). Other cities with active Cao Dai communities include Wichita, KS, New Orleans, LA, Portland, OR, Atlanta, GA, and Washington DC (Centre for Studies in Caodaism Website, 2010).

For the purposes of the documentary film project, I decided to focus on Cao Dai communities which were relatively close in geographically proximity to me for practical purposes. Wichita, KS was one of the first communities I contacted. They informed me that they were in the progress of building a new temple, and that they would allow me to film the opening ceremonies and conduct interviews when the temple was completed. Several months later I attended the inauguration of the Wichita temple. While there, I spoke to the temple's leader Hai Nguyen, as well as members of the Cao Dai Overseas Missionary. I was also able to chat with members of the Atlanta, GA chapter of the Cao Dai Youth Organization, an organization founded in Tay Ninh in 1947 modeled after the Scouting Movement. The Cao Dai community in Wichita, KS had only recently completed construction on their temple during the spring of 2010, taking over two years to construct it. The temple was officially inaugurated on May 9, 2010 with more than 400 Caodaists attending the ceremonies, many traveling as far as from California and Georgia to attend. The temple is scaled adaptation of the one in Tay Ninh. The Wichita

Cao Dai community is a small one, numbering some twenty families in a city where the total Vietnamese population Wichita is around 7,000. During my visit, I also met a couple of Caodaist families from Garden City, KS who are also active with the Wichita temple. The Garden City families typically worship in front of a home altar, but they travel to Wichita to attend the major festivals.

During my visit in Wichita, I met Minhdao Le of Thánh Thất & Điện Thờ Phật Mẫu Dallas/FortWorth who extended an invitation to visit the Cao Dai communities in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area, where his mother Muoi Huong Le is a priestess. Mrs. Le was ordained as a student priestess at the Tay Ninh Holy See in 1969. This is significant because Cao Dai clergy are appointed through séance. Since the Communist government banned the use of the séance in 1975, no more clergy are coming in to higher ranks. Moreover, most of the pre-existing leadership at Tay Ninh was sacked and the government installed its own cadre of leaders. Much of the original doctrine was changed to conform to the Communist Party line. Because so much of Cao Dai doctrine is dependent on divine decree, the abolition of spiritism by the Communist authorities had the effect of disrupting the Holy See's entire organizational apparatus. In 1996, the Communist Party commissar of Tay Ninh clarified the government's reasons for banning spiritism, writing:

"[W]e all agreed to fade out spiritism (a means for those who use religion to entice the people and pervert the religion). The system, which is like a nation within a nation, was wiped out, and the government has managed installations, used by the opponents, to establish a hold on the reactionaries, hoping to purify the religion so that religious followers may carry out their faith...Spirituality was

obliterated, and political guidelines for this religion were determined" (in Stuert, 2002).

The infiltration of the Tay Ninh leadership by government agents has created a situation where the Cao Dai communities abroad have no central leadership to look to for guidance. Thus, the overseas communities of Caodaists have had to essentially fend for themselves in governance and doctrinal matters. One interviewee said the Tay Ninh leadership is popularly referred to among the overseas community as the *Big Brother Holy Council*, while the leadership structure abroad is called the *Little Brother Holy Council* (Hoan Le, 2010). The majority consensus among the overseas community is that the Tay Ninh Holy Council has been compromised and that the government appointed leadership cannot be trusted. In addition to installing their own leaders and banning séances, the Communist government has re-written much of the Cao Dai constitution and doctrinal codes. Therefore most Caodaists abroad do not consider the current Tay Ninh leadership or doctrine to be legitimate. They look to the pre-1975 version of the doctrine, following and interpreting it as best they can while making practical adaptations as needed. The Little Brother Holy Council is far from a centralized organization, rather it is term used to describe the loose confederation of organizations such as the Cao Dai Overseas Missionary and the Cao Dai Non-Profit Organization. There is no de-facto governance structure overseeing the activities of the overseas communities. Thus, the local communities are left to fend for themselves, appointing clergy and adapting rituals as they see fit. In the United States, the absence of ordained clergy has necessitated the use of lay persons to perform the liturgy in many Cao Dai communities. Mrs. Le's status as a Holy See ordained student priestess is significant because she represents the last of a



small group of clergy who were divinely ordained according to the original doctrinal precepts.

There are two temples in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area: the Dallas-Ft. Worth temple located in the community of Garland, TX and the Mountain View temple. Both temples are of the Tay Ninh denomination. Between the two temples there are around 300 members. Several of the members are active in the activities at both temples, while others attend services at the temple closest to them. The Dallas-Ft. Worth Cao Dai temple was inaugurated in Garland, Texas in the fall of 2009; completed in the Tay Ninh style. A second larger temple is currently underway in Dallas, known as the Mountain View temple. Some 15,000 square feet in size, this new temple will be able to accommodate 700 people and will be the largest replica of the Tay Ninh Holy See temple in the United States. Exacting detail has gone into the temple's construction. Most of the sculptures and artwork adorning the temple were produced in Vietnam. Workers were flown in from Vietnam to oversee the temple's construction. Even the bricks used for the temple were custom made by a local firm to exactly match the color of the brick of the Tay Ninh temple. While waiting for the construction of this new temple to become completed, the Mountain View group has services in a building next door which has been converted into a small temple.

The first Cao Dai community I visited was the Cao Dao temple in Houston, TX. The group had been meeting since 1991, and a temple was constructed in 1998. Before the time of the temple's construction, religious services were held in an apartment approximately twenty minutes away from the current temple's site. After a new influx of Cao Dai refugees to the Houston area 1996, the community decided that the current

arrangement was inadequate and decided to construct a new temple. The new temple was exclusively built by the labor of the local congregation without the help of a contractor. The Houston community I visited is different from that of the Wichita or Dallas/Ft. Worth communities in that it is of the Ban Chinh Dao denomination. Ban Chinh Dao is one of twelve denominations which branched off from the original Tay Ninh organization. The sect was founded in 1934 when two judicial cardinals from Tay Ninh started their own Holy See with its own Pope at An Hoi, near Ben Tre. The Ban Chinh Dao sect grew to become the second largest Cao Dai denomination in Vietnam, and established some 263 congregations in Central and North Vietnam, as well as Laos (Oliver 1976, 131).

At the time of my visit, the Houston Cao Dai temple was led by Giao Huu Thuong Nhi Thanh. He came to the United States in 1991 from Da Nang, where he was a senior Cao Dai officer at the temple there. When he arrived, Nhi Thanh and other Cao Dai followers in Houston organized to found a congregation. The initial group consisted of 200 members with associations across the various sects. However, later some of those members who had been of the Tay Ninh denomination decided to breakaway and form their own church in south Houston. While some of those affiliated with the Tay Ninh sect choose to stay, about a hundred members left. The the Tay Ninh affiliated group in south Houston is currently raising funds to build their own temple, which similar to the other Tay Ninh groups will be an adaptation of the Great Divine temple in Tay Ninh. When asked about the differences between the Ban Chinh Dao and the Tay Ninh sects, it was explained that the Tay Ninh sect was more conservative in ritual, and tried to keep the liturgy as close to the Tay Ninh original as possible.

## **Future of Caodaism in the United States**

Cao Dai communities in the United States have been witnessing something of a revival. Several temples have been constructed in just in the last 10 years with more in the process of being constructed. Moreover, the Cao Dai Overseas Missionary has been particularly active as of recent: holding conferences and attending World Religious Congresses, as well as leading the effort to translate religious texts into English. Yet, Caodaism faces many challenges as it moves into the future. According to Miguel Leatham, an anthropologist at Texas Christian University who has conducted field work on the Cao Dai communities in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, there are three main challenges that the overseas communities face. First, there is the challenge of translating the doctrine and concepts of the religion from Vietnamese to English. Secondly, the discontinuation of séance activities presents numerous issues. The third challenge for Cao Dai communities in the United States deals with the question of how to preserve native traditions in a foreign land (Leatham 2010).

The language barrier is one of the main issues Cao Dai communities face in trying to pass down their customs, traditions and doctrine to later generations. The children of Cao Dai families in the United States have spent much, if not all of their up-bringing in the United States. As such, many of the youth are losing the ability to speak and read the Vietnamese language. This presents obvious problems for a religion with a doctrine and constitution written in Vietnamese, and communicating the precepts of the religion to the younger generations has been troublesome. Caodaism is extremely culture-bound, with a very developed doctrine and contemplative tradition. Much of the concepts of the religion are very nuanced and esoteric, and it has been difficult for the communities to

translate these concepts to English in order to preserve the tradition inter-generationally (Leatham 2010).

The second challenge for Cao Dai communities in the United States is associated with the discontinuation of séance activities. Since the Vietnam government's ban on séance activities at Tay Ninh, succession of the Cao Dai leadership has been a challenge. Without the ability to utilize the séance to ordain new priests as is required by the Cao Dai Constitution, American Caodaists are left to rely upon what is left of the pre-1975 ordained clergy for leadership and guidance. While these clergy members are getting older in years, there is no official replacement mechanism. This has necessitated the appointment of lay clergy by many of the temples in the United States. Because of the inability of Tay Ninh organization to appoint new clergy through the use of the séance, some groups in California have begun to form their own séances to elect their own leaders, despite the fact that it is illegal under the Cao Dai Constitution to do so. This potentially threatens the Tay Ninh orthodoxy as groups could essentially develop their own varieties of Caodaism out of different séances, which could potentially result in factionalism and schism (Leatham 2010). Indeed, in Caodaism's early history, the séance was one of the factors that led to the sectarianism, as Victor L. Oliver attested:

The séance has been and remains one of the major elements of Caodaism. Through this medium of divine revelation has come information for the organization, control, rituals, and doctrines of Caodaism. The séance was intended to be *the* unique characteristic of Caodaism because it was spirit-controlled suprahuman agency through which truth would be revealed and the possibility of human interference and error eliminated. The Caodai séance was to

be the source of the “mysteries of the religion. It was the miraculous element to captivate new converts and sustain the faith of older disciples. This has not always been the case. On many occasions the Caodai séance has become a source of suspicion and manipulatory practices, a sower of division within the religion (Oliver 1976, 90).

The séance, which was the mechanism that allowed for the rapid growth of the religion, was also partially responsible for the breakaway of the church into new sects. Despite a 1927 Tay Ninh séance directive from Cao Dai banning unofficial séance activities outside of Tay Ninh, unofficial séances continued. The leaders of these séances often issued competing directives, and many new Cao Dai sects were established supposedly because they had received an order to establish a new sect during an unsanctioned séance (Oliver 1976, 92-94). Thus, there is the potential that these new séance groups in the United States could lead to further factionalism and sectarianism. However, all of the groups I spoke with during the course of this project told me that since the Communist Government ban on séance activities at Tay Ninh, the séance was no longer needed because all of the doctrine and divine decrees required had already been communicated and were contained in their holy books and constitution.

The question of how to preserve native culture and traditions in a new country has been an issue for many immigrant groups who have come to the United States. According to Professor Leatham, this has also been a particular challenge for the Cao Dai community in the United States. Caodaism is very close to an ethnic identity, as the group has distinctive beliefs, customs and rituals which put them at a distance from other Buddhist and Catholic Vietnamese Americans. Moreover, Caodaists have an ascetic and

regulated lifestyle which involves daily prayer at different times of the day, a vegetarian diet, and attendance at the numerous rituals on the Cao Dai religious calendar. This Caodaist ascetic tradition is in many ways at odds with the culture of American society. Thus, it is a challenge for the new generation of Cao Dai youth who are attending school in the United States to maintain Caodaist tradition and orthodoxy in the shadow of American culture. Furthermore, the children are losing the ability to speak and read Vietnamese. Since, all of the literature of Caodaism is written in Vietnamese, the ability to pass on Caodaist traditions to the younger generations is in jeopardy. In order to address this issue, there have been efforts by some groups to translate Caodaist literature to English, and to get religious information out on the internet. The question of how to preserve traditions underneath the backdrop of dominant American culture is one significant challenge that Caodaist communities will have to contend with for years to come.

## **Conclusions**

The journalist and Vietnam historian Bernard Fall (1966) predicted that Caodaism was “destined to disappear,” believing that the movement would slowly fade into the annals of history (32). Today, Fall might be surprised to find that Caodaism has not only persisted in its native homeland despite systematic oppression by the Communist government, but has also established itself in more than 50 countries including the United States, where a new influx of refugees from Vietnam in the 1990’s has reinvigorated life into Cao Dai communities spread across several American cities. While the story of Caodaism is significant in anthropological, ethnographic, and religious contexts, the study of Caodaism’s past offers a conduit to understanding the history of Vietnam in new

and interesting ways. Caodaism's syncretic cooptation of Vietnam's main religions offers an understanding into the Vietnamese spiritual mindset, which was generally tolerant and accepting of different religions, and sought to gain spiritual awareness from many sources. In many ways, Caodaism was an attempt at institutionalizing the Vietnamese *tam giao* or "Three Teachings" tradition, which fused the precepts of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism hundreds of years before the establishment of Caodaism. While borrowing from this tradition, Caodaism sought to expand it to include newer religious ideas popular in Vietnam at the time such as Roman-Catholicism and Spiritism. As important socio-political actors in both the Vietnamese Independence Movement during the French Colonial period, as well as the Vietnamese American War, an understanding of these tumultuous historical periods cannot be complete without the study and consideration of Caodaism's role during these eras. Finally, Caodaism's emergence in the United States has posed significant cultural adaptation challenges for the religion. While it remains to be seen how these challenges will play out, it will be interesting to see how Caodaism continues to evolve and adapt to life in the United States in the future.

**Appendix A: Transcript of the Documentary Film “From Rice Paddy to Wheatfield: Caodaism in America’s Heartland”**

**OPENING:**

FADE IN:

“TEASER”

B-ROLL OF VIETNAM

COUNTRYSIDE

HISTORICAL FOOTAGE

SHOTS OF CAO DAI FOLLOWERS

IN TAY NINH

B –ROLL OF US TEMPLES AND

FOLLOWERS

FADE TO:

OPENING MONTAGE

FADE TO:

B-ROLL:

STILLS OF DIFFERENT RELIGIONS

SHOTS OF TAY NINH TEMPLE

HISTORICAL STILLS

STILL OF GRAMHAM GREENE

STILL OF BOOK

SHOTS OF TAY NINH TEMPLE

HISTORICAL FOOTAGE

HISTORICAL STILLS

CG:

GRAHAM GREENE

“THE QUIET AMERICAN,” 1955

**NARRATOR:** Vietnam: a nation steeped in tradition and history. A beautiful country today, its past has been characterized by war and colonization. Out of Vietnam’s tumultuous 1930’s, 40’s, and 50’s emerged a new religious movement. A new religion which blended native traditions like Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, with foreign ones like Catholicism. The new religion was called Caodaism and it professed that all the world’s religions were different manifestations of the same divine creator. Today, there are some 3 million practicing Caodaists in the world, many who have been spread across the globe as result of the Diaspora following the end of the Vietnamese-American War and the Fall of Saigon in 1975. Some of these Caodaists landed in the United States. This is their story.

**(OPENING MONTAGE AUDIO)**

**NARRATOR:** Born in Vietnam in 1926, Caodaism is a syncretist religion combining elements of the belief systems of Confucianism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Taoism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. With some three-million followers in Vietnam, Cao Dai is the third largest religion in the country behind Buddhism and Catholicism. Cao Dai means “high place,” symbolic of the place where God dwells. Central to their teachings is the idea that all of the world’s religions are different manifestations of the same god. According to the adept, Cao Dai exists to reconcile the differences in the world’s religions in an effort promote peace.

One of the first western accounts of the of the Cao Dai religion came from the British journalist and author Graham Greene; who wrote about his encounter with the religion in his memoirs, and also included a depiction of the faith in his novel, *The Quiet American*. Greene’s account of Cao Dai is that of a bewildered outsider looking in:



## HISTORICAL STILLS

B-ROLL OF WORSHIPERS

FADE TO: CAO DAI ALTAR

SHOT OF PANTHEON

SHOT OF ALTAR

CUT TO:

GIAO HUU THUONG NHI THANH

CG: TRANSCRIPTION

CG: GIAO HUU THUONG NHI  
THANH

LEADER, CAO DAI TEMPLE OF  
HOUSTON, TX

CUT TO:

STILLS OF:

BUDDHA, LAO TSE, COFUCIUS, LI  
TAI PE, GUAN YIN, QUAN CONG,  
JESUS, KHUONG THAI CONG.

SHOT OF: ANCESTORIAL ALTAR

STILLS OF: VICTOR HUGO, SUN  
YAT SEN, DESCARTES, JOAN OF  
ARC, LENIN, SHAKESPEARE,  
LOUIS PASTEUR.

B-ROLL:

CAO DAI CEREMONIES

CAO DAI TEMPLES

“Of all France's allies in Indo-China, the most astonishing are the Caodaists, members of a religious sect founded around 1920. Their capital, which they call ‘The Holy See,’ is Tay Ninh, some 80 kilometres from Saigon, where their Pope lives surrounded by cardinals of both sexes. At the entrance to the fantastic, technicolour cathedral are hung the portraits of three minor saints of the Caodaist religion: Dr. Sun Yat Sen, Trang Trinh, a primitive Vietnamese poet, and Victor Hugo, attired in the uniform of a member of the Academie Francaise with a halo round his tricorner hat. In the nave of the cathedral, in the full Asiatic splendour of a Walt Disney fantasy, pastel dragons coil about the columns and pulpit; from every stained-glass window the great eye of God follows one, an enormous serpent forms the papal throne and high up under the arches are the effigies of the three major saints: Buddha, Confucius, and Christ displaying his Sacred Heart.”

**NARRATOR:** The literal translation of Cao Dai from Vietnamese means “high place” or “high platform,” and symbolizes the place from where God reigns over existence. Caodaists also refer to their religion as The Third Great Universal Amnesty of God. This is in reference to the three historical revelations of God.

**NHI THANH LUONG (VO by NARRATOR):** Cao Dai literary means "high place" but it also means the name of god, even the nick name when he communicated with the first followers, his name is Cao Dai. From then on, when this religion was established they made the name Cao Dai. That's the short name. But the full name is Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do, or "The Great Way of the Third Revelation and Salvation.

**NARRATOR:**

Caodaists believe that God decided to reveal itself again through a third and final revelation by establishing the new religion of Cao Dai. Caodaists say that the Third Amnesty establishes a new path to salvation for humanity, and believe its core goal is the unity of all the religions of the world. Furthermore, they believe that God is the father of all beings and

the creator of all the world's religions. Caodaists contend that God has manifested itself at different times and places through various religions throughout history.

Caodaists revere a pantheon of nine deities. First among the many is the Supreme Being Cao Dai, represented by the Eye of God present atop of the traditional Cao Dai altar. On a second level below there is Buddha, Lao Tse, Confucius, Li Tai Pe, (a Chinese poet) Guan Yin, the Chinese bodhisattva of compassion and the Chinese warrior Quan Cong. On the third level stands Jesus Christ. At a fourth level, Khuong Thai Cong represents the Geniist traditions of ancestor, hero, and spirit veneration. Below this pantheon of deities are the numerous saints of the religion: Victor Hugo, Sun Yat-Sen, Descartes, Joan of Arc, Lenin, Shakespeare, and Louis Pasteur among many others. The saints of Cao Dai aren't chosen through a lengthy canonization process as they are in the Roman Catholic tradition; rather they are spirits who have chosen to reveal themselves during Cao Dai séances to communicate the proper direction of the religion. It is through these spirit messages communicated to mediums between 1925 and 1935 that the scriptures of Caodaism are derived.

CUT TO:

MIGUEL LEATHAM

CG:

DR. MIGUEL LEATHAM

INSTRUCTOR OF ANTHROPOLOGY

TEXAS CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

B-ROLL:

TEMPLE FOOTAGE

STILLS OF IMMORTALS, CAO DAI  
SAINTS

**MIGUEL LEATHAM:** : Well it is clear that they didn't seek to abolish the use of, or the recognition of the Chinese deities and Kwon Lee, Goddess of Sea and Mercy in China, is Kwan Am in Vietnam, and becomes Dao Tho Mau, the Holy Mother in Caodaism. The idea of immortals, having immortal heroic figures or culture heroes, patriotic heroes who become powerful spirits is also Chinese in origin, is Chinese Buddhism and they do preserve that. As you mentioned, some of those immortals are Victor Hugo and Joan of Arc and so forth. So there are French loan words, blendings from French usage, some luminaries and so forth. So those are big features that they also incorporated. And of course there's the geniism, the animistic traditions of Vietnam, the genies, the forest spirits and so forth, and they recognize all of that. The worship and veneration of ancestors, nature spirits and so forth is also a part of Caodaism. So there is essentially an incorporation of the indigenous traditions of China in the form of animism with the

introduced Buddhism from China that has the immortals and the deities, and on top of that another layer of immortals for the most part who are of European origin. As I understand, these include up to of well Winston Churchill, who I think was about the last one that got added, but William Shakespeare is also one of them, and they would fit literary men. They would have Victor Hugo and William Shakespeare among their immortals, and of course these immortals give messages. They speak – particularly Victor Hugo is very important. They speak with doctrinal messages, giving advice. The leaders of the 30's and 40's would receive messages from Victor Hugo in terms of what needed to be done to better the movement itself. It is what we call a syncretic tradition, it is a culturally blended tradition that conscientiously sought, and where leaders sought to incorporate both colonial influences and indigenous influences, and at the same time embracing not only the world religions but also the local traditions such as Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. It's a very hierarchical group, so the Confucian ethic is very strong. All of those were essentially blended into one tradition, even with kind of a permanency throughout the constitution.

FADE TO:  
TEMPLE FOOTAGE

**NARRATOR:** The diverse religious blendings of Caodaism can be seen in the iconography and design of the Tay Ninh Holy See temple, which incorporates elements of the world's great religions as well as local animist beliefs.

CUT TO:  
MIGUEL LEATHAM

**MIGUEL LEATHAM:** Well, the Tay Ninh Holy See itself built with a huge number of Cambodian peasant labor was completed in 1935. It's construction exemplifying what we mean syncretic belief in ritual. The church itself or the temple – I say its a church because its designed along basilic architecture lines, the basic architecture is that of a Catholic Basilica or cathedral with the two towers at the front, an nave down the middle, with pulpits and galleries along the sides and then a altar at the very far end of the building with two Caodai luminaries. Basically, it represented saints with haloes on the sides of the towers, and all of that harkens back to Catholic architecture, obviously the French influence

CUT TO:  
B-ROLL/STILLS OF HOLY SEE

STILLS:  
PHAM CONG TUC  
ALLAN KARDEC  
SPIRITISM SHOTS

is evident here. But the design elements within the decorative elements are Cambodian down the side, Cambodian Khmer arches, and of course the presence of a Hindu tower at the back, a minaret from Islam in the middle on top of which are both Shiva and Buddha. So we have again the cooptation if you will, or the incorporation of all of these different religions into one system. There is in addition in the interior of the Holy See building are stained glasses with lotus blossoms on them, deist triangles with the eye of Cao Dai in the middle resembling that found on your one dollar bill and the use of as I said the pulpit – all of these features are clear blendings of Catholicism with Buddhism with native tradition. The building was called by Graham Greene, “the ugliest building in all Asia” in the Quiet American I think it was, other people have remarked on its ascetic beauty and on the skill of the crafting of the teak that’s in it and so forth, beautiful dragon columns, very Vietnamese animistic traditions represented down the interior of the nave, and then of course the use of an altar that has instead of a crucifix the big orb with the eye of Cao Dai on it, and with seats for dignitaries much you would see in a cathedral with seats for the bishops, the archbishop and its clergy so there are a good number of Catholic influences. And I might add again that is to say that some of the founders’ original group that Chieu, the prophet had around him were Catholic – Pham Cong Tac was one of them and of course he became the successor to the first pope of the movement when Chieu died in 1935. Pham Cong Tac, the former Catholic became the prophet of the movement essentially receiving the séances and the messages from the séances. He designed most of the constitution and he’s responsible for the building up of Tay Ninh for over forty years. So the Catholic influence is very evident. They also had French spiritists reinforcement there, French spiritism was very popular of course. The 1920s the Kardecists movement, Kardec’s teaching about being in touch with the dead, and some of the techniques including the basket on a beak, is Vietnamese. That technique is telegraphed from the dead, using the spirit inside of the basket is Vietnamese, but the use of the Ouija board with the Romanized script, the Quoc-Niu Vietnamese letters is clearly French. And so there’s a

STILLS:  
HISTORICAL PHOTOS  
CLERGY  
PHAM CONG TUC

CUT TO:  
HISTORICAL STILLS/FOOTAGE

CUT TO:  
MIGUEL LEATHAM

FADE TO:  
HISTORICAL STILLS/FOOTAGE

blending of the Chinese sand writing with the Vietnamese animistic beaker in basket technique, where the basket moves to the different letters, and then the Ouija board concept which is French, all of those were used. They did use the planchet also, from France, and the table-tipping is not Vietnamese, it's French-spiritist. So the original séances with Chieu were with the table, tapped out the letters of the Vietnamese alphabet. So including the order that he refused, to become pope, it happened on Christmas Eve of 1926. Those techniques are all blended. They were used almost interchangeably as I understand and certainly the presence of symbolic elements, such as symbolic architecture, we have titles that come from Catholicism, then practically all of the clergy, priests, cardinals, archbishops, bishops, and pope, the Phap, those are clearly French-derived, Catholic-derived. And some would agree the garb as well, the clerical garb reflects Catholic influence as well as the robes, the mitre-like headdress of the Pope and so on. So there are a number of levels where it manifests itself, it is very syncretic.

**NARRATOR:** By the mid-1930's, Cao Dai's organizational apparatus had spread from Tay Ninh to several villages throughout Cochinchina. During this period, the Caodaist province of Tay Ninh was highly autonomous. The Holy See administration levied taxes and administered hospitals, schools, orphanages, a number of business enterprises, and even had its own army and police force. The rising influence of Caodaism in the villages caught the notice of the French, who concerned about its growing influence and power base sought to restrain its activities in the north and center of the country. As a result, Caodaism came to be concentrated mostly in the south of Vietnam.

**MIGUEL LEATHAM:** The religion grew very rapidly during the first 10 years, from about 1927 to 1940, to the Japanese invasion, the Mekong Delta region was quickly won over to Caodaism. Jane Werner has estimated several hundred thousand people came over and became adepts of the sect. At that time the movement was based upon what seemed to be the chain reaction of conversions of people as

FADE TO:  
B-ROLL:  
QUIET AMERICAN 1958 FILM

FADE TO:  
PHAM CONG TAC STILL  
FADE TO:  
HISTORICAL FOOTAGE  
DIEM STILL  
VIET MINH HISTORICAL FOOTAGE

FADE TO:  
MIGUEL LEATHAM

their landlords, the landholding elites joined the movement to become dignitaries, the peasants on their estates and under their care working on their lands also converted to follow that pattern and several hundred thousand joined. They eventually accumulated an army of about 3,000 men at Tay Ninh to back their hegemony and their control over the area, so much so that they were so powerful that by World War II, the French signed a deal with them to allow them to have their own operations in the Mekong, and they gave them military advisors and so forth. So they were a very powerful force in the region by the time of World War II.

**NARRATOR:** MGM's 1958 film adaptation of Graham Greene's novel "The Quiet American" gave American audiences one of its first glimpses into Caodaism. This footage was shot on location in Tay Ninh in 1957. The film's producers believed that they were shooting footage of a traditional Cao Dai religious celebration. However, they later found out that the event was actually a protest calling for the return of the Holy See's Ho Phap, Pham Cong Tac who had been in exile in Cambodia since 1955. In an effort to consolidate his political power, South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem ordered attacks on the Holy See in 1955, forcing the Cao Dai leader to flee. Later, a truce was reached and the Cao Dai military forces were consolidated into the South Vietnamese Army. This infuriated the Viet Minh, who already despised the Caodaists for their alliance with the French. Viet Minh reprisal attacks resulted in the deaths of some 4,990 Cao Dai followers, including women and children. The Communist takeover of South Vietnam by the North in 1975 saw the continued persecution of Cao Dai communities.

**MIGUEL LEATHAM:** The fall of Saigon, 1975, was preceded of course about a decade of Viet Minh in attempts to get the Caodai religion authorities, the Caodai dignitaries as they call them, to join their cause and the Caodaists would never do it. They had their own army, they had a lot of hegemony in southern part of the country and it appears to me from all of the reading and interviewing that I've done that they may have quite frankly underestimated the dire

B-ROLL:  
STILLS OF CAO DAI CLERGY

consequences that could fall upon them, from not making deals with the Viet Minh. On the other hand, it was against their principles, they chose to, as I understand, to remain largely on the outskirts of the war in Vietnam, the United States and North Vietnam and were marginalized. . In 1975, when the Viet Minh came to power, the Communist party essentially shut down the séances, the spirit sessions, meaning since 1975 they could no longer elect their own officials, according to the constitution of the sect at Tay Ninh, using spirit power, the spirit statements, through a voice box or through the beaker in basket technique, and as a result of that and their clergy are dying off with the hope of student priests from 1975 being ordained, so they're not coming into higher ranks. There's been no pope since 1935, when Le Van Trung died, and the Ho Phap, successor to him, was never really Pope, who built the sect, died at Phnom Penh in 1975, I believe, and then, and of course more recently, has been repatriated, his body went back to South Vietnam, but essentially the group has been trying to strangle the group out of existence, by shutting down the séances. In addition, the Tay Ninh temple is now staffed by government personnel, if not exclusively, then largely, subject of much complaint among, as you know Tay Ninhist here in the United States as well as over there, and the movement of people in and out of Tay Ninh, who have doctrinal literature, or coming from abroad, and so forth is closely monitored, and people I've talked to have been grilled pretty severely by Vietnamese authorities, when they've tried to exit with literature in their hands related to Caodaism, or who were known to have been clergy, and that sort of thing.

FADE TO:  
HOAN LE

CG:  
TRANSCRIPTION  
CG:  
HOAN LE  
CAO DAI TEMPLE OF PORTLAND,  
OR

**HOAN LE:** We know now that this is the most challenging period in the whole Caodaism's history. Even before under the French colony, the French oppressed the Vietnamese, we always had a Holy Council that guided us through difficult times. Now without the presence of the Holy Council this is the most challenging era in the Cao Dai history. The reason is that the one in Vietnam, controlled the Holy See, the Holy Council controlled by the government was an evil one. We can see that, we can say that, because it guided us to a wrong way. They tried to

divide us, us overseas. Whoever followed the Holy Council in Vietnam, they can get some benefit of being promoted to a higher ranking official. Those who don't follow them would be isolated, or severed. So to me, this is the most challenging era in our history.

FADE TO:

NHAT TUAN HO

CG:

NHAT TUAN HO

CAO DAI TEMPLE OF HOUSTON,  
TX

**NHAT TUAN HO:** Our family came here like a lot of other families before 1975, before we lost South Vietnam, my father served for the South Vietnam Army. And then after we lost the country, he had to go to jail for about five years. And then after he got out of the jail, we moved to the south part of Vietnam, they call Ba Ria. Yeah, that's where my grand parents lived, they lived, they lived in a temple in Bai Ria –a Cao Dai temple in Ba Ria. And how we came here was by a special program of the United States government, that whoever served for the South Vietnam Army, they would take us here by a special program.

FADE TO:

BOAT PEOPLE STILLS

VIETNAMESE IMMIGRATION  
STILLS

**NARRATOR:** The fall of South Vietnam saw an influx of Vietnamese refugees to the United States. With the fall of Saigon, 130,000 Vietnamese were brought to the United States for resettlement. This first wave of immigration was followed by the exodus of boat people who escaped Vietnam illegally from 1975 to 1985. Conditions for those who escaped by boat were severe, and many were victims of theft, rape and violence by pirates, while also having to languish in refugee camps as they waited for repatriation. An estimated 700,000 Vietnamese made their way to the United States as refugees. Another 200,000 Vietnamese arrived after 1980 as immigrants under programs like the Orderly Departure Program and the Humanitarian Operation. Today in the United States, there are more than two million Vietnamese-Americans. Of these, around 20,000-30,000 are practicing Caodaists, although there are no exact numbers. Today, small Cao Dai communities exist throughout the United States. One of these communities exists in Wichita, Kansas; where the local Cao Dai community there has recently constructed a new temple modeled after the Great Divine Temple at the Holy See in Vietnam. The

BROLL:

WICHITA TEMPLE CEREMONY  
FOOTAGE



temple opened in the fall of 2010.

FADE TO:  
HOAN LE  
CG: TRANSCRIPTION  
STILL:  
NEW ORLEANS TEMPLE

**HOAN LE:** We started immigrating to the United States in 1975, and initially Caodai followers, we get together and we create the Caodai organization. Up until the 80's most of the organization was for supporting each other. And then finally, starting in 1992, we had the first official Giao Huu (priest), he came here and he wanted to promote all of the organizations to become a formal structure. By that time, the followers got together and established the official religious committee with a similar structure to Vietnam and we evolved from there. In 1992 in New Orleans, there was a group of Cao Dai followers, they would like to build a temple similar to the one in Vietnam, and it took them seven years to get it done. And it was very big, very impressive, very beautiful, became a landmark in New Orleans. Because of that, each of us in different states, it was our dream to have a similar temple. One of the groups like that was Wichita here. So, and then Southern California, Santa Ana, those groups commit to build a Cao Dai temple a couple of years ago. And then Houston follow that, Dallas and Ft. Worth follow that, and now we have the fifth city that complete building a beautiful Cao Dai temple.

STILL:  
DALLAS TEMPLE

FADE TO:  
B-ROLL  
DALLAS/FT WORTH TEMPLES

**NARRATOR:** The Dallas/Ft. Worth area has an active Cao Dai community. In fall of 2009, the Dallas-Ft. Worth Cao Dai temple was inaugurated in Garland, Texas; completed in the Tay Ninh style. A second larger temple is currently underway in Dallas, known as the Mountain View temple. Some 15,000 square feet in size, this new temple will be able to accommodate 700 people and will be the largest replica of the Tay Ninh Holy See temple in the United States. Exacting detail has gone into the temple's construction. Most of the sculptures and artwork adorning the temple were produced in Vietnam. Workers were flown in from Vietnam to oversee the temple's construction. Even the bricks used for the temple were custom made by a local firm to exactly match the color of the brick of the Tay Ninh temple. While waiting for the construction of this new temple to become completed, the Mountain View group has

services in a building next door which has been converted into a small temple.

FADE TO:  
MINHDAO LE

CG: TRANSCRIPTION  
CG: MINHDAO LE  
MOUNTAINVIEW CAO DAI  
TEMPLE, DALLAS, TX

B-ROLL:  
MOUNTAINVIEW TEMPLE  
CEREMONIES

**MINHDAO LE:** There was six families start and buy a little land with a house and workshop, and we started because we are a small group of Cao Dai and we are new to this country. Like, we come here with nothing. Only now we have what we believe in what Chi-Ton (god) teach us, and we try to have a place to worship. It's all based on our heart. Every disciple, they believe in the teaching of Cao Dai. We, every single one of us have a duty to spread the message of what Chi-Ton teach to the world. And it's also very hard for us, because this is a new culture and a new language for us. The basic teaching is just love; love with no conditions, and to practice justice. And all the other teachings are in the holy message, holy book, and we just have to follow that. In the future, we are hoping that we will have freedom of religion, (in Vietnam) then we can really practice what god is teaching us, and the way of the practice, the way of the ritual. Right now, there are certain rituals that we cannot practice exactly like in the book in Vietnam. But over here, it is also hard too, because we do not have all of the books. We have some, and some are missing and we practice as what we have. And this is a new environment for us too. And the other thing is we have to not only adapt to the life, but to the life of the people who live in a new and second country.

FADE TO:  
MIGUEL LEATHAM

B-ROLL  
CAO DAI WORSHIP SERVICES  
CAO DAI YOUTH  
TRANSLATED CAO DAI  
LITERATURE  
HMONG PHOTO

**MIGUEL LEATHAM:** Caodaism comes close to being an ethnic identity, they have self-contained colony at Tay Ninh, the group has distinctive rituals, customs, and beliefs that are syncretic, that set them apart from Buddhists, Catholics from Vietnam, they have a very regulated lifestyle that is highly ascetic, world-rejecting, that involves ten days of fasting from meat per month, and so on, a lot of different ins and outs that have to be known to be a good Caodaist that involve asceticism, and those are traditions that are at odds with dominant American society, and culturally. And so for the children who are going through high school and so forth to maintain Tay Ninh orthodoxy so to speak, to maintain Caodaist life ways it's quite a challenge, and they're losing, as I said, they're losing the language, that is an issue that the parents have

commented on numerous times. Almost all the literature on Caodaism is in Vietnamese, it's in Quoc Nu, Vietnamese Romanized script. This is a huge problem, and I know at present, there's a huge effort, there seems to be a massive effort afloat to try and get things translated into English, but it just can't go apace. There is danger there for them, in terms of risk of losing some of the traditions or losing children to the tradition altogether. So those are concerns that, some of them hearken back to the political problems in Vietnam, but others just relate to the Diaspora itself, I think that those adaptational processes are, they're worrisome for the parents. But to a degree that's the same situation for the Hmong from Laos, with their animistic traditions, and so any of these Indochinese ethnic groups that moved to the United States and that are facing considerable cultural distance from the native traditions, and preserving that is always a challenge.

FADE TO:  
HOUSTON CAO DAI YOUTH

**HOUSTON YOUTH 1:** As you grow older, you're always learning. That's like a lot of religions though, there's a lot of different rules that you learn, it helps you shape into a better person when you are older. So a lot of times when we were a lot younger, the little kids' age, every Sunday we'd get together. We'd see a lot of cousins and family. We are all like one big family verses one religion, so it builds a lot of family bonds.

FADE TO:  
CAO DAI YOUTH INTERVIEWS  
HOUSTON, TX  
CG:  
CAO DAI TEMPLE  
OF HOUSTON, TX

**HOUSTON YOUTH 2:** I mean, when we were younger we didn't understand much. And I think, we don't have that many youth around, like the youth of our age, so it's kind of difficult, but at the same time, everybody has a busy life schedule. But they are so willing to teach us and try to get us to learn more even though everybody is so busy. They only ask for our time every couple of hours a day. That's what they are trying to get us to do now is to learn. Because their generation, they want us to pass it on from generation to generation.

**HOUSTON YOUTH 1:** Well it's funny because the first thing they ask is what is it? And we're like, oh we worship the eye –as a joke. Because when you come in you see the eye, and that's the dominant symbol of the

religion. And you explain, we then they ask, “are you Catholic?” It’s like the first thing they ask you before you tell them what religion you are. They’ll say, “are you Catholic? Are you Buddhist?” We’ll say like, no we are kind of like a little bit of everything. And that is like the easiest way to explain it, like there’s just one and we kind of like spread it all out. We are all a little bit of everything, everyone is sort of right in their own little way. And then, it makes them feel a little bit better about us too, so we kind of bond in that level as well.

FADE TO:  
ATLANTA CAO DAI YOUTH  
CG:  
CAO DAI YOUTH ORGANIZATION,  
ATLANTA, GA

**ATLANTA YOUTH:** We need to preserve not only our religion, but also our culture. So the temple is a place that gives us that opportunity to get together and do all these kinds of activities that we wouldn’t be able to do so effectively if we didn’t have the temple. And it’s a place where all the members gather, to pray to god together. What else do we do? All the youth come in and learn Vietnamese, the little ones, and we also learn about our religion. Because growing up in America, we don’t have opportunity to go to the original Holy See temple in Vietnam. We don’t have opportunity to explore and have a deeper understanding of our religion. Therefore, the temple gives us a place to come and learn from the older generation to understand the messages of God, of what the Supreme Being is trying to teach us so that later on we can pass it down to our later generations.

FADE TO:  
NHAT TUAN HO

**NHAT TUAN HO:** Basically right now, we try to post everything over the internet. And we’re going to let the younger read more. Even if they can’t read it in Vietnamese, they can read it in English, we try to translate it in English, so that they understand more about Cao Dai. They can understand more about their parents, their grandparents. You know, like me, the first day I came to Cao Dai I had been living with my grandparents at a temple that they lived in all their lives. And when I lived with them, I learned a lot from them by the way they lived. I learned from them by the way they lived and I learned more about Cao Dai when I grow and get bigger. But before I didn’t know anything about Cao Dai I already saw how they lived. You know, they taught

me how to be a good person.

FADE TO:  
HOI LUONG

**HOI LUONG:** I'm so proud to be Cao Dai too. Because it makes me feel very comfortable to go to any other church, temple, Buddhist temple. Or anywhere I go I feel very comfortable because I see that present in my church, in my temple. So I don't know if you guys have that feeling too, but I feel very comfortable. Of course, since I have become a Cao Dai follower I definitely believe that it should be the universal religion, religion that will help the world to become more peaceful and to prevent any unnecessary war in the future.

FADE TO:  
STILL OF BERNARD FALL

**NARRATOR:** The journalist and Vietnam historian Bernard Fall predicted that Caodaism was "destined to disappear," believing that the movement would become but a footnote in the pages of history. Today, it appears that Fall's prognosis was false. While continuing to persist in Vietnam, Caodaism in the United States is witnessing something of a revival. With small Cao Dai communities throughout the US, Caodaism has established itself in its adopted country, where it continues to be a religion made up of many religions, born out of conflict, professing peace.

B-ROLL  
WICHITA CAO DAI TEMPLE  
OPENING CEREMONIES

FADE TO BLACK  
ROLL CREDITS

**Appendix B: Interview with Dr. Miguel Leatham, Instructor of Anthropology and Director of the Department of Anthropology, Texas Christian University - November 19, 2010**

**LF:** Okay, for the record tell me your name and your position at the university and what are some of your research interests?

**ML:** Well I'm Dr. Miguel Leatham and I'm an instructor of Anthropology and director of the Anthropology program at Texas Christian University, and I've been here for about 10 years. I specialize in the study of religion, particularly new religious movements. I got interested in Caodaism very early in my time here at Texas Christian University, about 2001 when I contacted a little bit about the literature about Tay Ninh Holy See and found a temple here in the Dallas area, the Mountain View temple that you will be visiting, where I was able to do some interviewing. My research during the first three years that I was visiting the temple focused on what had been a schism, a splitting between the two temple communities: and original temple and a secondary one founded in the 90's and my interest was in finding out more about how that had occurred and what the disagreements were over basically. But also I was very interested in the Tay Ninh tradition, the idea of preserving an original Cao Dai tradition in the Diaspora, so that's where it began.

**LF:** Can you tell me a little bit more about Caodaism, how did it began and who started it?

**ML:** Caodaism is a new religious movement that began as a revitalization of Buddhism in Vietnam in 1927 with the regional prophet Ngo Minh Cheiu having visions of Cao Dai, a Taoist creator deity that encouraged him to found a movement that would unite all the world's sacred traditions into one new tradition under Cao Dai, which is the term for

Caodaism. The group that he founded this movement with, about 26 men in Saigon were all literate Vietnamese men who read in French, and probably read Victor Hugo in the original French and so forth, and some of whom were Catholic, and some were of Buddhist origin. They thought that Buddhism was in decline, and that it was in degeneracy as they put it and that they needed to revitalize it and rejuvenate it, and bring it back to its original basis. So it was a combined interest in bringing together the truths of what they considered the truths of the world's great religions: Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and also revitalizing the native Buddhist base that they had. Chieu, of course as history has documented had refused the order of Cao Dai in a spirit session to become pope and was essentially thrown out of the movement and the movement went on to elect a pope basically using spirit medium séances and spirit table tipplings. They developed out of that original group and that original group and that original pope constituted a full doctrine that is distinctive, blending elements of the different religious traditions, mostly Buddhist elements were evolved. Eventually in 1935, after the death of the first pope, they created the Holy See, a religious movement colony that became a holy city. The constitution was not finished until after the death of the first pope in the 30's. The constitution lays out the three branches of government for the Caodaists. It has the norms of comportment and so forth. That constitution which is quite lengthy became the basis of the Tay Ninh operations of schools, orphanages and hospitals and church religious activity, and it stipulated the election of officials for example by spirit sessions. There are strong spiritists elements both from France and from and from geiism, from animism in Vietnam enter in here because the clergy from that timeline could only be elected by the holding of a spirit séance. That's why they are

having problems today with the Vietnamese government shutting down the spirit sessions in Tay Ninh. So it began as a movement to rejuvenate Buddhism in a way, but by doing that, by incorporating elements from other religious traditions and making a claim that they had all of those traditions in one now, that they were a summation of world religions. The religion grew very rapidly during the first 10 years, from about 1927 to 1940, to the Japanese invasion, the Mekong Delta region was quickly won over to Caodaism. Jane Werner has estimated several hundred thousand people came over and became adepts of the sect. At that time the movement was based upon what seemed to be the chain reaction of conversions of people as their landlords, the landholding elites joined the movement to become dignitaries, the peasants on their estates and under their care working on their lands also converted to follow that pattern and several hundred thousand joined. They eventually accumulated an army of about 3,000 men at Tay Ninh to back their hegemony and their control over the area, so much so that they were so powerful that by World War II, the French signed a deal with them to allow them to have their own operations in the Mekong, and they gave them military advisors and so forth. So they were a very powerful force in the region by the time of World War II. I should mention one other thing, I'm sorry, about the Cambodians. The Cambodians impact was significant. The Cambodian peasants also got involved in this, in addition to the indigenous Vietnamese, and of course that was somewhat the result of the Cambodians being very impressed by the spirit sessions that were being demonstrated by missionary women particularly that would go from Tay Ninh over the border into Cambodia. The Cambodians thought that this was a manifestation of mystical power, and they came across and actually they helped build Tay Ninh and the church, the temple itself was built



with Cambodian labor. The Cambodian peasantry was a significant addition in the growth of the movement.

**LF:** One of the big things in Caodaism is the pantheon, it is a very diverse pantheon of deities, heroes and spirits, and made up of both Eastern and Western personalities. I was wondering if you could just tell us a little more about the pantheon.

**ML:** Well it is clear that they didn't seek to abolish the use of, or the recognition of the Chinese deities and Quan Lee, Goddess of Sea and Mercy in China, is Quan Am in Vietnam, and becomes Dao Tho Mau, the Holy Mother in Caodaism. The idea of immortals, having immortal heroic figures or culture heroes, patriotic heroes who become powerful spirits is also Chinese in origin, is Chinese Buddhism and they do preserve that. As you mentioned, some of those immortals are Victor Hugo and Joan of Arc and so forth. So there are French loan words, blendings from French usage, some luminaries and so forth. So those are big features that they also incorporated. And of course there's the animism, the animistic traditions of Vietnam, the genies, the forest spirits and so forth, and they recognize all of that. The worship and veneration of ancestors, nature spirits and so forth is also a part of Caodaism. So there is essentially an incorporation of the indigenous traditions of China in the form of animism with the introduced Buddhism from China that has the immortals and the deities, and on top of that another layer of immortals for the most part who are of European origin. As I understand, these include up to Winston Churchill, who I think was about the last one that got added, but William Shakespeare is also one of them, and they would fit literary men. They would have Victor Hugo and William Shakespeare among their immortals, and of course these immortals give messages. They speak – particularly Victor Hugo is very important.

They speak with doctrinal messages, giving advice. The leaders of the 30's and 40's would receive messages from Victor Hugo in terms of what needed to be done to better the movement itself. It is what we call a syncretic tradition, it is a culturally blended tradition that conscientiously sought, and where leaders sought to incorporate both colonial influences and indigenous influences, and at the same time embracing not only the world religions but also the local traditions such as Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. It's a very hierarchical group, so the Confucian ethic is very strong. All of those were essentially blended into one tradition, even with kind of a permanency throughout the constitution.

**LF:** You said it was a syncretic religion, and probably one of the most obvious places it is syncretic is in the Tay Ninh temple itself. I was wondering if you could speak to some of the iconography of the temple and how they incorporate a lot of these different religions into the design of the temple.

**ML:** Absolutely. Well, the Tay Ninh Holy See itself built with a huge number of Cambodian peasant labor was completed in 1935. It's construction exemplifying what we mean syncretic belief in ritual. The church itself or the temple – I say its a church because its designed along basilic architecture lines, the basic architecture is that of a Catholic Basilica or cathedral with the two towers at the front, an nave down the middle, with pulpits and galleries along the sides and then a altar at the very far end of the building with two Caodai luminaries. Basically, it represented saints with haloes on the sides of the towers, and all of that harkens back to Catholic architecture, obviously the French influence is evident here. But the design elements within the decorative elements are Cambodian down the side, Cambodian Khmer arches, and of course the presence of a

Hindu tower at the back, a minaret from Islam in the middle on top of which are both Shiva and Buddha. So we have again the cooptation if you will, or the incorporation of all of these different religions into one system. There is in addition in the interior of the Holy See building are stained glasses with lotus blossoms on them, deist triangles with the eye of Cao Dai in the middle resembling that found on your one dollar bill and the use of as I said the pulpit – all of these features are clear blendings of Catholicism with Buddhism with native tradition. The building was called by Graham Greene, “the ugliest building in all Asia” in the Quiet American I think it was, other people have remarked on its ascetic beauty and on the skill of the crafting of the teak that’s in it and so forth, beautiful dragon columns, very Vietnamese animistic traditions represented down the interior of the nave, and then of course the use of an altar that has instead of a crucifix the big orb with the eye of Cao Dai on it, and with seats for dignitaries much you would see in a cathedral with seats for the bishops, the archbishop and its clergy so there are a good number of Catholic influences. And I might add again that is to say that some of the founders’ original group that Chieu, the prophet had around him were Catholic – Pham Cong Tac was one of them and of course he became the successor to the first pope of the movement when Chieu died in 1935. Pham Cong Tac, the former Catholic became the prophet of the movement essentially receiving the séances and the messages from the séances. He designed most of the constitution and he’s responsible for the building up of Tay Ninh for over forty years. So the Catholic influence is very evident. They also had French spiritists reinforcement here, French spiritism was very popular of course. The 1920s the Kardecists movement, Kardec’s teaching about being in touch with the dead, and some of the techniques including the basket on a beak, is Vietnamese. That

technique, a telegram from the dead, using the spirit inside of the basket is Vietnamese, but the use of the Ouija board with the Romanized script, the Quoc-Niu Vietnamese letters is clearly French. And so there's a blending of the Chinese sand writing with the Vietnamese animistic beaker in basket technique, where the basket moves to the different letters, and then the Ouija board concept which is French, all of those were used. They did use the planchet also, from France, and the table-tipping is not Vietnamese, it's French-spiritist. So the original séances with Chieu were with the table, tapped out the letters of the Vietnamese alphabet. So including the order that he refused, to become pope, it happened on Christmas Eve of 1926. Those techniques are all blended. They were used almost interchangeably as I understand and certainly the presence of symbolic elements, such as symbolic architecture, we have titles that come from Catholicism, then practically all of the clergy, priests, cardinals, archbishops, bishops, and pope, the Phap, those are clearly French-derived, Catholic-derived. And some would agree the garb as well; the clerical garb reflects Catholic influence as well as the robes, the mitre-like headdress of the Pope and so on. So there are a number of levels where it manifests itself, it is very syncretic.

**LF:** Let's talk about what has happened to Caodaism after 1975, obviously we had the fall of Saigon, the Communists took over Vietnam, tell me a little more about that, and some of the challenges that is has presented for this group.

**ML:** Definitely yes, the fall of Saigon, 1975, was preceded of course about a decade of Viet Minh in attempts to get the Caodai to religion authorities, the Caodai dignitaries as they call them, to join their cause and the Caodaists would never do it. They had their own army, they had a lot of hegemony in southern part of the country and it appears to

me from all of the reading and interviewing that I've done that they may have quite frankly underestimated the dire consequences that could fall upon them, from not making deals with the Viet Minh. On the other hand, it was against their principles, they chose to, as I understand, to remain largely on the outskirts of the war in Vietnam, the United States and North Vietnam and were marginalized. In 1975, when the Viet Minh came to power, the Communist party essentially shut down the séances, the spirit sessions, meaning since 1975 they could no longer elect their own officials, according to the constitution of the sect at Tay Ninh, using spirit power, the spirit statements, through a voice box or through the beaker in basket technique, and as a result of that and their clergy are dying off with the hope of student priests from 1975 being ordained, so they're not coming into higher ranks. There's been no pope since 1935, when Le Van Trung died, and the Ho Phap, successor to him, was never really Pope, who built the sect, died at Phnom Penh in 1975, I believe, and then, and of course more recently, as you have pointed out, has been repatriated, his body went back to South Vietnam, but essentially the group has been trying to strangle the group out of existence, by shutting down the séances. In addition, the Tay Ninh is now staffed by government personnel, if not exclusively, then largely, subject of much complaint among, as you know Tay Ninhists here in the United States as well as over there, and the movement of people in and out of Tay Ninh, who have doctrinal literature, or coming from abroad, and so forth is closely monitored, and people I've talked to have been grilled pretty severely by Vietnamese authorities, when they've tried to exit with literature in their hands related to Caodaism, or who were known to have been clergy, and that sort of thing. One of the student priestesses whose case that I had looked at in my own fieldwork, here in this area, said

that she was very severely interrogated, several hours by Vietnamese authorities when she brought in literature and when she tried to exit with literature on Caodaism, and she's stated she's not going back. So the situation has gotten more severe, actually, since 1995, they had that conference, the Communist party had a conference on reevaluating the relationship with the state to these religious groups, including Catholicism, and they tightened the screws down further on the sect. So I don't see, -there doesn't seem to be any chance as Blagov and others have pointed out, that they're going to loosen that hold in the near future. Caodaists are involved around the world, apparently in dialogue, with the LDS Church, and other groups that are persecuted in other countries or abroad, or in their own country, and in trying to exert some pressure, for human rights, people to do something about this, to bring political pressure on the Communist party, I don't see that that's going to change in the near future. They supported the wrong side, as far as the Viet Minh are concerned. The Communist party would, I'm sure, like to see them disappear. That's my impression.

**LF:** Tell us a little bit about the Caodai communities in the United States, and more specifically, this area, the Dallas-Fort Worth area. What kind of numbers are we talking about, and how big are these communities, the local communities?

**ML:** Well the exact numbers of the temples in the Dallas area are not, I have never seen that they have an exact census on it, but I have been told that there are in excess of 200 members attending between the two temples over in Dallas, and these are people that are coming in now, there are several services a day in Caodaism and people are coming and going on an informal basis, and they are attending two different temples in some cases, and so it's hard to get an exact take on it. It's a small community. I think that they know

each other quite well, it seems clear that a good number of them, I don't have percentages, but certainly the Mountainview Temple, that the majority of them are from the Tay Ninh province area. Many of these are people who have emigrated to the United States in the early 90s, including the Le family, or, as you know, the student priestess's family there, so we have from what I can tell there is a strong Tay Ninh orientation, that is a centralist orientation, that is people who live the life at Tay Ninh, some of them before the takeover, and know what that life was like, when they had their hospitals and orphanages and schools, and you know, they were self-sufficient, and would like to recreate that here. But as I've mentioned to you earlier, the earlier temple in the Dallas area was not, although it was founded by men from the Tay Ninh area, they were lay people, though, and the temple itself was not entirely Tay Ninh tradition, perhaps there were some adaptations that were made, from what I understand, that were not considered to be authentic, or that were not considered to be exactly the way they were done in Tay Ninh. So it was an adaptation, or from what I gather, it was an adaptation, to the absence of clergy. With the Le family arriving, we now have presence of a clergy person, a student priestess from Tay Ninh, and got her student priestess's certificate in 1969, it's on her wall, stamped with the Tay Ninh seal, that would alter the possibility for having a more expanded ritual life. Perhaps a more exacting ritual. That's the difference opinion, apparently, that have developed, I don't want to go on record saying exactly that was everything that happened, but that's been indicated to me. One thing that was also striking to me was that the children of the families that were born in the United States, that is, to Tay Ninh people, do retain a sense of, I've got a sense, of you know, pride in the fact that they are from a family that hails from the very center of the new religion,

they have the traditions most strongly implicated of any families in the temple perhaps, they were the closest to the center of doctrine and the teachings and so forth, and so there is a sense that the family needs to preserve Tay Ninh versions of things, orthodoxy, if you will. The big challenge and this goes back to your earlier question about the political situation, is that there are two forces strongly working, and anthropologically or sociologically speaking, that served to limit the expansion of Caodaism, and for one it's a proselytizing religion. I should say actually there are three things. One is its highly culture-bound, present in that the concepts are very esoteric and Buddhist, and there is a lot of detail evolved in the doctrine, it's extremely well-developed, and a very contemplative tradition on the one hand. On the other hand, you're dealing with a society in the United States that has a strong consumerist orientation, where Buddhism is a minority religion, to begin with, and where the concepts of the religion are the most nuanced metaphor and so forth is communicated in Vietnamese, not in English, it's very difficult to translate their doctrinal precepts and the children are losing the ability to read and speak Vietnamese. All of that works against the survival of Caodaism intergenerationally, and this is something that people like Dr. Bui, I'm sure, are very aware of, and have youth councils over this and so forth, to try and preserve the tradition. Secondly, because of the stranglehold, by Hanoi on the official activities of the religion in Vietnam, these séances being shut down and so forth, and the succession is now problematized. And the possibility that in any religion that has spirit possession ritual, and the possibility of doctrinal revelation through spirit possession means that that religion is going to be facing a possibility of an open invasion process where new charismatic leaders or authorities claim that they have new procedures, new doctrine, and



so forth, based on some spirits' revelation and we now know that that's happening in the United States, I don't have documentation of it, but I have heard that there are groups in California, temple communities that are formed around their own séances, which are illegal, under the constitution of Caodaism, and that they are electing their own priests and so forth, having them selected from séances. That's always a possibility, and that threatens the Tay Ninh centralization again, the Tay Ninh orthodoxy, as people begin to develop their own varieties of Caodaism essentially, out of different séances. So that's a second process, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> issue is that there is high tension in general between Caodaism and other Vietnamese religions, and certainly with dominant American patterns. And children aren't learning about this, they aren't going to be learning about this in school, they don't even learn Vietnamese history in school, and the preservation of all this tradition is strikingly difficult for Caodaist families, because not only are you trying to pass on Vietnamese, Viet kin ethnic traditions, but you're also trying to pass on a particular variety of Vietnamese ethnic identities. Caodaism comes close to being an ethnic identity, they have self-contained colony at Tay Ninh, the group has distinctive rituals, customs, and beliefs that are syncretic, that set them apart from Buddhists, Catholics from Vietnam, they have a very regulated lifestyle that is highly ascetic, world-rejecting, that involves ten days of fasting from meat per month, and so on, a lot of different ins and outs that have to be known to be a good Caodaist that involve asceticism, and those are traditions that are at odds with dominant American society, and culturally. And so for the children who are going through high school and so forth to maintain Tay Ninh orthodoxy so to speak, to maintain Caodaist life ways it's quite a challenge, and they're losing, as I said, they're losing the language, that is an issue that

the parents have commented on numerous times. Almost all the literature on Caodaism is in Vietnamese, it's in Quoc Nu, Vietnamese Romanized script. This is a huge problem, and I know at present, there's a huge effort, there seems to be a massive effort afloat to try and get things translated into English, but it just can't go apace. There is danger there for them, in terms of risk of losing some of the traditions or losing children to the tradition altogether. So those are concerns that, some of them hearken back to the political problems in Vietnam, but others just relate to the Diaspora itself, I think that those adaptational processes are, they're worrisome for the parents. But to a degree that's the same situation for the Hmong from Laos, with their animistic traditions, and so any of these Indochinese ethnic groups that moved to the United States and that are facing considerable cultural distance from the native traditions, and preserving that is always a challenge.

**LF:** Just one more question. As an anthropologist you've studied other religions. Are there any other religions that you think have parallels to Caodaism? Are there any similarities?

**ML:** Absolutely. Vodou in Haiti comes to mind immediately, where you have spirit possession, African gods, spirit possession, Catholic saints held alongside the African gods, functionally separate, but acknowledged with the image of the Holy Trinity being used to symbolize the high god of Vodou, Bondye, and it's also a product of the Creolization process with the French, where Catholicism was forced on the slaves in Haiti, in the 1600s, and they developed religion, while it doesn't syncretize the Catholic faith fully with African beliefs, it holds it in tandem with it as a functionally separate belief system for public recognition to almost be Catholic in Haiti, but it is a product

almost of French influence, and the fact that one must recognize all Catholic forms. So that's similar. There are many syncretic new religious movements around the world; typically they occur in colonial situations, just like Caodaism. Lastly, I should mention that the idea of a religious colony of this sort, having a holy city, founded under charismatic leader is very common and of course I've studied one of these groups in Mexico, New Jerusalem, where a very large city indeed, 5000 people, under charismatic leader, a similar type of situation, where the entire city is governed by a constitution that was revealed by the Virgin Mary, so you have a medium, you have the idea that no information of any use to anybody comes from any other source than that medium, spirit possession essentially, and the voice box medium phenomenon is typical of Geist traditions in Indochina, where shamans speak with the voice of the spirit, and give divinatory information, Caodaism adopted spirit sessions, largely their form was not through the voice box medium, it was through the Planchette, or the pointing to the letters of the alphabet and then transcribing a message, but nonetheless a spirit is revealing information, no human agency is involved, in terms of the generation of information. So there are similarities, colonies that are rooted in charismatic leaders develop a very oppositional stance toward the world; they're beachheads of [anti-] imperialism against an unbelieving world. By moving to Tay Ninh, they did create, as Caodaist leaders, the Caodai leaders created a heightened sense of exclusivity and election among their followers. This is a bounded geographical unit, here is where tradition really exists, and this is the center and a great pilgrimage shrine was created to attract people to the religion and the boundaries of food, dress, the buildings themselves, the great temple, the Holy See, all of that led to a heightened sense of exclusivity for Caodaism. It's a very

important feature of this new religion. It isn't Buddhism, which is an open field, that's actually more of a folk religion in Vietnam, in this particular instance we're talking about a corporate group, and those corporate traditions also serve to separate them from other Vietnamese. My guess is that their relationship with Buddhists and Catholic Vietnamese communities in many areas is somewhat, if not difficult, tenuous, because of the networking, because of these differences, they belong to a distinct variety of being Vietnamese. Vietnamese identity comes in many forms, I'm sure, but they are nationalists, but to belong to a corporate group that has distinctive dress, boundaries, place of origin and so forth, and the syncretism with the French-Catholic ideas, that especially, is highly distinctive of this group, and separates them from other Vietnamese believers. I feel that the sectarian nature of the oppositional and the sense of contrastive nature of this particular group and their desire to convert the world, essentially, which is very much a part of this proselytizing religion, although that's softer than many other groups, nonetheless that does create something of a dividing point, network-wise, with other Vietnamese. We will be seeing that, they probably have been stigmatized as well, I would guess, looking at other new religious movements like this, is that they've been stigmatized as strange, quote "cultists" sort of thing, it's a new religious movement that contains unacceptably deviant views for some people, particularly the Catholics, and so I don't know how well they would associate here with the other Buddhist and Catholic communities, but interviewing them I gather it wasn't really intensive, and the worship-round is so intensive in Caodaism, there are so many different rituals that one attends, four times a day there is liturgy and so forth. That creates a very implosive type of effect, in terms of social networks, people looking to the center, and staying together, with

people like-minded belief and so forth, so that also contributes to Caodaism and separatism and difference, but they do participate Tet celebrations in the United States, with their distinctive garb, white spiritist robes, that's French. The use of the pictures of the Ho Phap, as a messianic figure, they're out there, they're not rejected by other groups. So they do compare closely with other colony groups, in the way that they intensify identity through the creation of a particular location as a center of belief. Of course the term Holy See itself was adopted from the Catholicism, St. Peter's, and the idea of having this visible center of identity, so that I think that being in the heart of Buddhist country, in the Mekong, and so forth, the Buddhist religion, they were able to carve out a space where they could say, we have all of that, we have more, and if you come here, you could be part of a group of people who have found the ultimate combination of all these religions. Dress like this, eat like this, live here, and be a Tay Ninh-er, a Tay Ninh believer, and that's, that must have created a very strong sense of election, specialness, among the believers who come here. So in that sense, they also resemble a group that I studied, another colony group, very bounded corporate identities.

**LF:** I think that's all the questions I have. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

**ML:** Well, like I said, it will be interesting to see, you know, in the next coming decade, how the religion survives among those who are already Caodaists, if unity is maintained on a broad basis, or if we see a rapid proliferation of seancing groups that have decided to do their own thing. Because of the stranglehold by Hanoi, and also the proselytization efforts that have expanded somewhat, the overseas missionary that Dr. Bui has led, and so forth, he's trying to translate the constitution of Caodaism, they're working with Dr.

Lang. There are efforts to translate doctrinal manuals, and just get it into some kind of form that Anglo-Americans can understand, so that they can also be Caodaists. So it's a big challenge, but it's up in the air right now how that will play out. In any case, their situation is no different fundamentally from that of the preservation of the native religions, shamanism, and other religious features of other Indo-Chinese groups in the United States, who are facing other similar adaptational problems with the children, inter-generational continuity, so we'll have to keep our eyes open on that.

**LF:** Well, great, thank you very much.

**ML:** My pleasure.

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