

Bibliography
pp 7, 9

OLIVER 2

Cao Daiism: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of a Vietnamese "Expressive Social Movement"

Background: Cao Daiism is a religion indigenous to Vietnam. A devotee, Nguyen-trung-Hau, at the end of the First World War, said,

The Vietnamese people have previously assimilated and unified foreign religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and recently Catholicism, and were now anxious to find a new spiritual way of life, under the various trends flowing in from everywhere in the world. Thus was born among the Vietnamese people a yearning towards a universal religion capable of unifying all souls....¹

Cao Daiism is an example of this attempt in forming such a universalistic religion.

Founded in 1926 in South Vietnam, Cao Daiism gained over 20,000 followers within one year. In 1967 they had between one and two million disciples.² In its ritualism and basic theology, Cao Daiism incorporates elements of a variety of faiths, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, Roman Catholicism and Spiritism. Being extremely syncretistic, Cao Daiism welds these elements into a functioning religious movement which manifests itself in a blend of such practices as priestly celibacy, essence inquiry, vegetarianism, celebration of important holy days such as Christmas and Tet-Nguyen Dan (New Years Day) and the reverence of ancestors.

Herbert Blumer defines a social movement as, "A collective enterprise to establish a new order of life."³ In these terms, Cao Daiism is a social movement that has a widespread appeal among all classes of the Vietnamese. It has grown from a minor religion in 1926 to a major socio-religious movement. Religiously, Cao Daiism

¹Nguyen-trung-Hau, Luoc-Su Dao Cao-Dai--A Short History of Cao Daiism, Trung Hung, Danang. 1956, pp. 5.

²Harvey H. Smith, et. al, Area Handbook for South Vietnam, U.S. Gov't Printing Office, Washington. 1967, pp. 184.

³Herbert Blumer, "Collective Behavior" (Bobbs-Merrill, S-31).

became one of the most powerful groups in South Vietnam. In Tay-Ninh Province alone, almost 90% of the people are Caodaists.⁴ Politically, this religion has been a seedbed of Vietnamese nationalism. According to the late Bernard Fall, by the end of the Second World War, Caodaism was strong enough to have gained control of South Vietnam if the leadership had seized the available opportunity. Economically, Caodaism established their own factories, providing jobs for some of their followers. They also had a special administrative agency to take care of economic matters, e.g. to look after their poor and hungry.

Proposed Research: My research will involve a cross-cultural analysis of Caodaism. I will utilize Herbert Blumer's model of an "Expressive Social Movement" as an instrument of cross-cultural comparison. This comparison will show in what ways Caodaism's founding, growth, leadership, internal and external relationships, and crystallization of creed and rituals agree or differ with this Western model. One special aspect of the research will be an evaluation of Caodaism's syncretistic nature and its significance to the movement as a whole. The result of this research may indicate the validity of using Western models to analyze Asian religious movements.

The particular focus for analysis will be the Caodai mother sect, the Tam-Ky Pho-Do, which is the name of the original Church located in Tay-Ninh (schism among the Caodai leadership has resulted in eight other groups founding their own centers in other South Vietnamese cities). No attempt will be made to analyze exhaustively the movement as a political party. It will be necessary, however, to relate the ideals and goals of Caodaism to the basic facts of its political activity, especially during the period from 1932 through 1954--during which time the movement attained its pinnacle of power and then fell to its political demise through the influence of Ngo Dinh Diem.

⁴Joe Mayor, The Saigon Post, February 21, 1965, pp. 4.

Procedure: The inadequacy of published materials on Caodaism necessitates research in Vietnam. I have examined resource materials at Cornell University and have corresponded with scholars who are specialists in Vietnamese affairs, Alexander Woodside (Harvard University's East Asian Research Center), Truong Huu Lam (State University of New York, Stony Brook, Long Island) and Milton Sacks (Brandeis University). The major source is a two volume work in Vietnamese by Dong-Tan. Volume one deals with what Cao Dai adherents call the "non-action" (phan vo vi) phase of Cao Dai history in the 1920's. Volume two narretes the actively salvationist "universal passage" (phan pho so) period in the 1930's--this is the classification used by the Caodaists.

In the West, such scholars as the late Bernard Fall and Gerald C. Hickey have written briefly of Caodaism. For example, Fall's article on "The Political-Religious Sects of Vietnam", Pacific Affairs, (September 1955) and Hickey's small section in Village in Vietnam (1964). The Department of the Army published a pamphlet, #550-105, Minority Groups in the Republic of Vietnam (1966) and, also, the U.S. Army's area handbook for Vietnam (1967) has two small sections on Caodaism amounting to approximately eight pages. The only book published on Caodaism in a Western language is Gabriel Gobron's Histoire et Philosophie du Caodaisme. This book was published in 1948 and is limited in its coverage of the religion.

I must go to Vietnam to do thorough research in all available libraries, such as the Trung-Tam van but Viet-Nam, The Center for Vietnamese Letters; and also, the book centers, Khai-Tri and La-hoi. Interviews will be conducted by my wife (who lived in Vietnam six years and speaks Vietnamese fluently) and I, with such scholars as Le Hoang Phu, a Vietnamese historian, key Caodai personnel such as Cao Hoi Lang and Le van Tat. I also intend to be a participant observer in the various Caodai rituals and ceremonies at the Holy See of the church in Tay-Ninh, and Caodai agricultural communities in the immediate area.

Having lived in South Vietnam for almost four years I have adequate facility in the language to be able to conduct interviews

and pursue research in Vietnamese. When possible, tape recordings will be made of interviews so that conversations and their English translation may be checked for accuracy. On occasion, a Vietnamese translator will be used to aid in the translation of literature written in the "chu-nho" style, the "high language" which incorporates many Chinese terms, phrases and words.

Before leaving the United States, some research is planned at Harvard University and in Washington D.C. An interview is planned with the granddaughter of the founder of Cao Daiism who lives in San Francisco.

In conclusion, my interest in Cao Daiism began while I was residing in South Vietnam (1962-65). My wife and I were aware of some of the outward manifestations of Cao Daiism through visits to their temples. At that time, however, although able to read the literature and make general observations on their rituals, I was not trained to do competent analytical research. I am challenged to do such investigation now and having had interdisciplinary graduate training in anthropology, Asian religions and sociology, I feel more adequately prepared for the task.

Research Outline

Introduction

- A. Importance of the Study and Statement of goals
- B. Description of Methodology
 - 1. Social Movements--a brief survey of the literature
 - 2. Herbert Blumer's typology of social movements
 - 3. Herbert Blumer's model of an "Expressive Movement"
 - 4. Syncretism--its definition, nature and function within the scope of the paper

II. Historical Backgrounds of the Major Religions in Vietnam

- A. Pre-Colonial
 - 1. Buddhism
 - 2. Confucianism
 - 3. Taoism
 - 4. Spirit Worship
- B. Post-Colonial
 - 1. Roman Catholicism
 - 2. Protestantism and other small groups
 - 3. Major hierarchical or doctrinal changes in any of the major religions in the 1900's

III. Early History and Growth of Caodaism

- A. The Founding of Caodaism
- B. The Cao Dai Membership
- C. Goals and Growth Strategy
 - 1. Explicit and implicit religious and political goals
 - 2. Analysis of stated means to attain these goals
 - 3. Statistical growth patterns
- D. Sectarian Divisions within Caodaism
- E. Brief Summation of Expansion of Caodaism through 1954

IV. Crystallization of Caodaism's Philosophy, Doctrine and Rituals

- A. Concepts of the Supernatural

B. Organization

C. Rituals

V. Analysis of Syncretistic Elements in Caodaism

VI. Comparison of Blumer's Sociological Model with Caodaism

A. Do the Stated Characteristics of the Model apply?

1. Growth patterns
2. Membership
3. The Role of Prophet
4. Concept of conversion
5. Centralization of creed and rituals
6. Justification of movement via apologetics and doctrine
7. Persecution and criticism of followers
8. Sense of "supernatural calling"
9. Progressive changes in goal-orientation

B. Value of Utilizing Western Sociological Models to Analyze Asian Religious Movements

Conclusion

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