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**FROM COLONIAL SYNCRETISM
TO TRANSPACIFIC DIASPORA**
RE-ORIENTING CAODAISM FROM
VIETNAM TO CALIFORNIA



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FROM COLONIAL SYNCRETISM TO TRANSPACIFIC DIASPORA RE-ORIENTING CAODAISM FROM VIETNAM TO CALIFORNIA

ABSTRACT: This paper will explore two key concepts, which seem to relate quite differently to the spatialisation of religion: syncretism, the mixing and synthesizing of different religions to create a sense of unity in one place, and diaspora, the creation of a sense of unity across different places. Syncretism is often described as the “localization” or “indigenization” of world religions, while diaspora involves the sacralisation of an idea of home through the experience of exile and dispersal. One brings varied elements together in a single place, and describes a process of combination and re-configuration as the followers of different religious traditions interact. The other exports local visions or combinations to distant places, but continues to bind them through emotional and spiritual ties to the place of origin.

SYNCRETISM AND ITS THEORIES

Syncretism is a word that awakens strong passions. Studies of syncretism acknowledge the fact that all religions are historically constructed, that their boundaries are permeable and fluid. But they may also evaluate this fluidity. For some, syncretism is desirable, since it is a sign of tolerance, innovation, symbiosis, and mutual respect. For others, it is negative, since it is a corruption of religious integrity, a contamination of the authentic tradition with indigenous or inappropriate content. It is this combination of the analytic use of the term syncretism and the evaluative use of the same term that has made scholars suspicious of it, and has even moved some scholars to ban it from their vocabularies.

Earlier this year, I presented versions of this paper at two institutions – the National University of Singapore and Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City. At NUS, Nancy Florida told me passionately that she “did not believe in syncretism, and did not think the word should ever be used by scholars”. As a specialist on Javanese court culture, she had seen the word used to argue that the Javanese practice a “syncretistic combination” of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam,

which was not “authentically Muslim”. People who follow what Clifford Geertz called the *abangan* “village tradition” or *priyayi* “elite tradition” (Geertz 1960) were being persecuted as apostates, condemned as traitors to Islam and targeted by purifying reformist militias. She was committed to showing how Javanese court officials fit into a centuries-old Sufi tradition that was also thoroughly “Islamic” (Florida 1993, 1995).

A month earlier, in Ho Chi Minh City, I encountered virtually the opposite response: A Vietnamese professor of comparative theology told me that in Asia, drawing on more than one religious tradition has almost never posed problems – existential, doctrinal, or otherwise. The explicit theorizing of the issue by theologians in the Western academy reflects particular intellectual currents that have converged to construe religions as discrete entities, but this was never how they were perceived in East Asian civilization. It was the 19th century “invention” or at least labeling of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism – as well as Hinduism – as specific “isms” that made religious mixture into a problem, when it had usually not been a problem at all to practitioners in the past.



The second speaker was a follower of Caodaism, the third religion of Vietnam. Caodaism, born in French Indochina in 1926 has been described as a particularly extreme or outrageous form of syncretism – *un syncrétisme à l'outrance* – since it combines the three great Asian traditions of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism with elements of Roman Catholicism, French spiritism and Theosophy. Its excessive, even transgressive combination of the gods of east and west, and also of piety and blasphemy, respectful obedience and rebellious expressionism opened it up to critical evaluations and almost 80 years of misunderstandings. Caodaists are proud of their syncretistic theology, which they present as the culmination of all world religions as well as more recent movements towards a universal faith.¹



Interior of the Great Caodai Temple in Tay Ninh, Vietnam, facing the entrance and the three mediums.

For scholars of Islam – and, especially during the colonial missionary era, those of Christianity – syncretism was such a negative word that it had to be banned to prevent the persecution of even the most mildly idiosyncratic practitioners. For scholars of the three great East Asian traditions, it was useless for almost the opposite reason – because the idea of multiple religious belonging was so evidently common and desirable, it was redundant to speak of “syncretism” when clearly the symbiotic co-existence or interpenetration of these various traditions could only serve to enrich human society.

Syncretism is given a negative, pejorative meaning by the proponents of revealed religions, who often try to deny that their own beliefs and

practices were historically constituted (Stewart 1999, 2004). The alchemy metaphor is a popular one: Mixtures can either combine together to create a compound, which is a new entity, a synthesis, or they can co-exist as two ultimately irreconcilable substances, which will invariably separate over time – like oil and water – because their component parts are incompatible and must remain forever distinct. Fundamentalists assert that religious or cultural essences should be preserved over history, through a series of “purification” projects designed to return each substance to its original, revealed truth.

Syncretism is the enemy of fundamentalism. It also the real engine for the creation of all religions, which build on earlier traditions (as Christianity built on Judaism, Zoroastrianism and even Hellenism). Modern scholars of religion recognize that “syncretism appears as a common feature of all observed religions, and the process of delineating this study has been described as moving ‘from a theological term of reproach to a concept in the science of religions’” (Thomas 1997, 507). In order to move towards a more positive sense of syncretism, we must recognize it as a process, a project in itself, which moves from an implicit stage to a more explicit one, and acquires a more complex, hierarchical and deliberate character in this second stage.

Implicit syncretism works through idiosyncratic adjustments – the decision to appeal to a new god here, to adopt a new practice there. It involves a tacit sense of correspondences, without extensive reflection or deliberate selection. Its logic is often instrumental and moved more by concerns with efficacy (“something that works”) rather than theology.

Explicit syncretism involves the conscious selection and combination of different traditions, often led by an intellectual elite, which produces new doctrines and a new religious field.

I will argue that syncretism is a useful term because it helps us to focus on a particular stage in religious mixing and development **the explicit syncretizing moment**: when religious mixing becomes conscious and is reflected upon. Intellectuals and religious specialists may become explicit syncretizers as a retrospective justification of popular religious mixing. This is when the transition from implicit, instrumental religion is made

¹ The Caodai website of the Sydney Centre for the Caodaism states this clearly: “Before revealing Himself to found Caodaism, which is the syncretism of the ancient doctrines, God sent the Great Spirits incarnate in the World to create various philosophical societies aimed at giving new life to human consciousness. Examples are the Theosophical Society, the Society for Research into Buddhist Philosophy, the Psychic Society, study of Spiritism, etc. Most of these societies were founded to

teach the Truth to all the countries of the world, one century before the appearance of Caodaism.” <http://www.caodai.net/eng/links>. Accessed October 21, 2000, quoted in Hartney 2000, 240.



to explicit, doctrinal syncretism. The moment of reflective awareness is a theologizing moment, a time when implicit connections need to be made explicit.

My position is that Caodaism represents an unusually explicit form of syncretism, which built on a much longer tradition. For almost a thousand years, Vietnamese people had practiced a symbiotic fusion of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, and scholar officials applied for government positions by writing essays commenting on the relationship of the “the three great traditions”. The implicit mixture of these three teachings – none of them explicitly formulated as an “ism” or a “world religion” before the dawn of the 20th century (Masuzawa 2005, Van Der Veer 2014) – was de-stabilized by colonial conquest (Blagov 2001, Oliver 1976, Smith 1970a, 1970b, Werner 1981). Southern Vietnam became the first part of East Asia to be brought under full European colonial rule – a rule complete only in the southern third centered on Saigon (where the French ruled directly), and less complete in other parts of French Indochina, which were protectorates under the indirect rule funneled through the Nguyen imperial dynasty.

The Generation of Caodai founders in 1926 sought to unite all the Vietnamese people into a single national religion – a kind of “Vietnamism” – which would provide the spiritual basis for achieving independent national sovereignty. They did so by incorporating organizational elements from the Catholic Church and Chinese redemptive societies, as well as spiritist texts from French writers like Victor Hugo and Allen Kardec. Within three decades, two and half million people had converted, and 20-25% of the people of southern Vietnam (the French colony of Cochinchina) were Caodaists (Blagov 2001, Werner 1981). Caodaism became (and still is) the third largest religion in Vietnam, after Buddhism and Catholicism (Hoskins 2009, 2012b, Jammes 2009).

Half a century later, the generation of diasporic Caodaists in 1975 included refugees and exiles who re-worked the doctrines of this new religion to make it into a more flexible faith of unity which could develop outside of Vietnam,

and expand its syncretism into a new cosmopolitanism. Today Caodaism has expanded to about four million followers, and squeaks in to the “top ten world religions” category in various surveys and is becoming a global presence.²

Caodai syncretism is visually displayed in its eclectic religious architecture: The front of a Caodai temple looks like a Gothic cathedral in Technicolor: it has high Gothic towers, a vaulted ceiling, a nave and various columns.



The Gothic façade at the entrance is a “European front” to an Asian interior.

From the side however, one can see that it is built on nine ascending levels, with an onion dome at the center and an octagonal gold-plated palace at the end, called the Eight Trigram Palace, which is where divination, spirit writing and the most important conversations with divinities all take place.

The “European front” is the least sacred part of the structure, and the marble floors and dragons and lotuses in the interior lead up to a huge globe bearing the left eye of God – symbolic of a positive, dynamic and Asian monotheism, a pantheon headed by the Jade Emperor which includes Buddha, Confucius and Lao Tzu at the highest rank, and relegates Jesus to the third level, as the leader of the “way of the saints”.

² Recent estimates of Caodaists at four to six million include Hartney 2000, 236 and Jammes 2009, 246. Jack David Eller (2007, 188) in his textbook *Introducing Anthropology of Religion* lists Caodaism as tied with Shintoism for tenth place among world religions at 4 million. On May 23, 2013, the website adherents.com listed estimates of Caodaists ranging from 2 to 8 million. The Vietnamese Department of Religion estimated 3.2 million in 2007 (Phạm Bích Hợp). I cite their figures of 2.2 million “official” Tây Ninh Caodaists and 1 million in

other denominations, although I agree with religious leaders that there may be at least a million more “unofficial” followers. The number of official followers has grown since 2007, since dozens of temples have been restored and re-opened, and it has become less of a professional liability for Vietnamese citizens to profess a religion on government ID cards.



Bát Quái Đài or Eight Trigram Palace is built first, but found at the rear.

Caodaists worship the “left eye of God”, representing the Jade Emperor, a forceful, positive, masculine deity represented on a globe at the main altar. He is addressed as “Cao Đài” (literally, “the tallest tower”), a name for the Supreme God, who is also Jehovah, the father of Jesus.



The Left eye of God is represented on a huge globe at the main altar in Tay Ninh.

In order to explore the relation between syncretism and diaspora, I will first examine the impulse behind the creation of Caodaism in colonial Saigon.

FRENCH VIEWS OF VIETNAMESE RELIGION AS “CONFUSIONISM”

The religious field where Caodaism emerged was framed by French discourses of comparative religion and secularism, and a new nationalist rhetoric emerging along with Pan-Asianist ideas from figures like Tagore and Sun Yat-sen. Vietnamese religion was under attack. Even relatively sympathetic French observers described it as a shapeless, anarchic jungle of elements. Here is the famous opening to the French missionary scholar

Léopold Cadière’s description of *The Religion of the Vietnamese* (1999, 1):

Vietnamese religion (if indeed one can use the singular) produces an impression like that which is inspired by a journey into the great forest of the Annamite Cordillera: on all sides are great tree trunks, their roots penetrating to unfathomable depths, supporting a vault of foliage lost in shadow; branches stoop down to the earth and take root; seemingly endless creepers run from tree to tree, their origins undiscoverable [...].

While his description is not without an appreciation for aesthetic value of Vietnamese ritual (“there are inextricable thorns, and fronds of surpassing elegance and delicacy”), it also stresses elements of decadence (“the bark of the trees is dark, gnarled, or slimy, and one cannot touch it without a shudder, there are dead branches upon a thick carpet of mold and decay”). And yet he finds within it a vitality and exuberance that is inspiring (“on all sides sap thrusts up and life abounds in overwhelming profusion”).

But what he does not find is coherence, or order, or a logical relation between the parts. While he argues that “religious feeling makes itself fully manifest and dominates the whole of life”, he describes it as parading in the pomp of official ceremonies or “lurking furtively” at the foot of a tree or in front of a rough stone. Because of this strong religious feeling, the Vietnamese may “bow down before baleful idols” or “make a serpent into an object of worship”: “Magic, with its barbaric or absurd practices, is mingled with the noblest of religious observances”. While he recognizes Buddhist and Taoist elements, he concludes that “in the bulk of its beliefs and practices”, Vietnamese religion is “close kin to (and almost confounding itself with) the baser religions characteristic of primitive mountain dwellers.”



Tây Ninh dignitaries dressed in red, turquoise and golden robes.



It was descriptions like these that inspired the rage of a group of southern Vietnamese intellectuals. They responded by this critique by a French missionary by deciding that they needed their own “Jesuits” – religious scholars who would help them to claim a position within the religious field and re-invent Vietnamese traditions as a “religion” as centralized and imposing as the Catholic Church. They also needed their own organization – “a Vatican in Vietnam” – with a powerful administrative hierarchy and the capacity to transform worldly service to their new religion into celestial ranks after death. And they received spirit messages telling them that the Supreme Being had recognized their sufferings and their humiliations and would provide them not only with a divine mandate to organize such a religion but also a new set of revelations to guide its growth.

I will also, however, add another stage to this argument, and say that when a religion travels, becoming one of the “new immigrant religions” in North America or Europe, it is challenged to become more self-reflective. The formation of a diasporic religion involves a re-playing of this explicit syncretizing moment in a new landscape.

THE JADE EMPEROR REVEALS A “NEW RELIGION OF THE SOUTH”

The mandate to form a new religion came from the Jade Emperor, who contacted a group of three young Spiritists who worked in French colonial offices in Saigon. After months of refusing to reveal his identity, a very erudite and literary spirit came down in a midnight séance in Christmas Eve in 1925 to declare:

For as long as we have seen, the southern country has not had its own religion. Its foundation must now be laid [...] I, as the highest Master, have founded the Tao in this southern region to compensate a country that since the beginning of its history has regularly suffered my vicissitudes. This time, I have decided to forgive you for your sins and redeem you by returning glory to your country. Since Heaven created the earth, no other country [...] has been capable of what you will be able to do. I will give the greatest rewards to those disciples who show that they are most worthy of my favor [...] From this day on, there is only one true religious pathway, the Tao, and that is my pathway, that of your Master, which I have founded for my disciples and named as the national religion of this region. Have you understood me? (Bui 1972).

Following this revelation, Caodaism went off in a bold new direction that was significantly different from any earlier religious movement.

In 1926, twenty-eight prominent Indochinese leaders – teachers, civil servants, businessmen and landowners – and 254 others signed a public document, which established them as the “founders” of Caodaism (Blagov 2001, Werner 1981). It was as a sort of “Declaration of Religious Independence”, which clearly stated that dozens of once secret societies were to be united under one banner to reform morality and revive traditional ethics. What was not explicitly stated – but was clear for all to see – was that this ambitious unification of religious groups in Vietnam was meant to create a community strong enough to stand up to both the French Catholic Church and the secular French state.

Since 1905, France has had the strongest separation of church and state of any European power, and it has guaranteed the neutrality of the state and the freedom of religious exercise. While the colonial state made no such guarantee of political freedoms (especially for incipient nationalists), when a community was incorporated as a religion, it would be hard to challenge its legality.

Agents of the French secret police suspected that Caodaism was a “political movement masquerading as a religion” (Blagov 2001, Werner 1981). They sent hundreds of secret agents to spy on religious ceremonies, and their reports in the colonial archives in Aix-en-Provence are indexed under “politics”, not “religion”. The committee of leaders who founded Caodaism were part of an educated elite, and did form something of a revolutionary vanguard. They recognized the strategic advantage of seeking to reform the country through a religious vision, at a time when there was a severe repression of political dissent. The kinds of moral and ethical reform that they proposed were part of the nationalist project, but their own re-drawing of the borders around religion (modeled on western notions) were also motivated by a shrewd analysis of what could be prohibited by a secular state and what it should be committed to tolerate.

They built a splendid holy city, including a Great Temple with a Gothic front, and 1338 smaller versions of this temple throughout the countryside (and there are now almost a dozen replicas of this temple overseas – in Little Saigon, California, as well as New Orleans, Dallas, Houston, Wichita, Kansas, Montreal and Paris). This “edifice complex” buttressed a congregational and ceremonial form of ritual that in many respects resurrected the vestments and pomp of the now banned Confucian rituals. The high pointed hats worn by Caodai dignitaries are modeled on those of Confucian scholars presenting themselves at the imperial examinations.



The California Caodai temple in Garden Grove, Orange County.

I argue that Caodaism created a new religious field in French Indochina, and in doing so invested a number of very traditional elements with new significance and new dynamism. While it later also added a number of French influences and other references to world historical figures, these came somewhat later in its development and were not essential to its formation. I will also add another stage to this argument, and say that when a religion travels, becoming one of the “new immigrant religions” in North America or Europe, it is challenged to become more self-reflective as well. So the formation of a diasporic religion involves a re-playing of this explicit syncretizing moment in a new landscape.

THE CONCEPT OF THE RELIGIOUS FIELD

Pierre Bourdieu developed the concept of the religious field, which has been elaborated and applied to modern China by Goossaert and Palmer (2010, 9–10):

A religious field comes into being when a class of religious specialists emerge and try to centralize, systematize and control a body of knowledge. In doing so, they assert their religious authority and create a field of power in which others are disqualified as laypeople or dismissed as practicing “superstition”, “magic” or some lower form of popular religion.³

The creation of a new religious field is often described as the “modernization” of religion, but it can also be the opposite of modernization. Par-

³ Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer *The Religious Question in Modern China*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2011, 9–10. They draw on Pierre Bourdieu 1971 “Genèse et structure du champs religieux”. *Revue française de sociologie* 12, 295–334. This notion is also quite close to what Stanley Tambiah calls a “religious field of practice” (1970) – in that it includes other religions but

adoxically, this new religious field can be a *defensive weapon* used by the advocates of “tradition” who want to claim the same status for the beliefs and practices they already have as the beliefs and practices of Christianity. In Vietnam as in China, when a self-consciously “religious field” was opened up in the 19th and early 20th centuries, it was as a result of a dialogue between Vietnamese heritage and Christian missionaries, as well as secularizing political reformers and revolutionaries.

RE-STRUCTURING AN ASIAN PANTHEON WITH FRENCH “SAINTS”

The Caodai pantheon of saints includes not only Asian figures and Jesus Christ, but famously also Victor Hugo, Jeanne d’Arc, Jean Jacques Rousseau, De la Fontaine, even Lenin. Reviewing these “outrageous saints”, one thing that is notable is that many of them (especially Hugo and Rousseau) were already “canonized” in the secular shrine of the French republic – the Panthéon mausoleum in Paris.



Mural showing Sun Yat-Sen, Victor Hugo and the Vietnamese poet Trang Trinh signing a divine alliance for God and humanity, love and justice at Tay Ninh entrance.

Victor Hugo was significant to colonized intellectuals because he was a proponent of popular emancipation and an opponent of the death penalty, who defined himself as the sworn enemy of Napoleon the 3rd, the conqueror of French Indochina (Hartney 2004, Robb 1997, Tran Thu Dung 1966). Transcripts of spiritist séances in which

also secular institutions, “the exigencies of history” and memory in local communities (originally presented in *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*. Cambridge University Press, 1970).



Hugo participated were published in 1924, and contained messages from Jesus “reconsidering” aspects of Christianity and prophecies that a new global religion would emerge in the 20th century, with Hugo as one of its prophets. Hugo virtually “applied” for the position of a Caodai prophet with this prophecy.

His spirit first made contact with Caodai mediums stationed in Cambodia, and by the late 1930s he was named the “spiritual head of the overseas mission”, carrying the message of Caodaism to France and other Francophone colonies. As a vegetarian who dabbled in Orientalist fantasies and mysticism, Hugo seemed to form the perfect bridge between 19th century romanticism and 20th century struggles for self-determination and social justice.

Jeanne d’Arc was canonized by the Catholic Church, but her status as a French national heroine depended on a story of a poor peasant girl who heard voices telling her to rise up against a foreign army occupying her homeland. In Caodai scripture, she defends the right of each people to self-determination.

The spirit of Lenin made contact with Caodai mediums in 1926, just two years after his death (being dead is one of the prerequisites for spiritist communication), many years before Vietnam became a communist country. In the message, Lenin concedes that the revolution of the proletariat was already suggested in Buddhist ideas of equality, so the central moral lessons of communism were already there in Asian tradition (Vinh 1962).

European philosophers, writers and revolutionaries who “come down” and provide teachings in Caodai séances do so to preach against French colonial domination. The inclusion of western figures was an argument for parity – for the fact that Asian literary figures were the equivalent of European ones – and not for the “worship” of European figures themselves. Caodaism imagined the creation of a new religion as a conversation of sages of all ages, in which the founders of France’s cultural heritage take seriously Vietnamese claims to sovereignty and autonomy.

CAODAISM AS A RELIGION OF DECOLONIZATION

In the early 20th century, a number of Chinese-influenced redemptive societies developed a three-stage eschatology leading to a “third era” when the world would be redeemed, after many years of suffering. Caodaism innovated in explicitly identifying this third era with the fall of European

empires, and it was therefore a “religion of decolonization” which fused the project of restoring Vietnamese sovereignty with the religious goals of moral and ethical revitalization.

Colonized intellectuals in Saigon perceived Christianity through the lens of anti-colonial struggle. They embraced the notion of the Vietnamese as “God’s chosen people”, who has suffered greatly under the yoke of French colonialism, but would be rewarded in receiving a special mission to reconcile the religions of the Occident and the Orient into a new modern synthesis (Hoskins 2012b, Werner 1981). Jesus was seen as a nationalist leader (crucified as “the King of the Jews”) who fought for the independence of his people against an empire based in Rome. Jesus owed filial piety to his father, the Jade Emperor, and was placed in a somewhat junior position in relation to the older Asian sages like Buddha, Confucius and Lao Tzu. Caodaists celebrate Christmas as the birth of a new Savior, but give no special meaning to Easter, since all human beings are believed to re-incarnate in new bodies and in this sense return to the world in another corporeal form.

The “committee” of prominent citizens who founded Caodaism, responding to these messages from the Jade Emperor, was transformed into an intricate administrative hierarchy blending Confucian titles with Catholic ones. There was a “Pope” (addressed in Vietnamese as *Giáo Tông*, a bit closer to “President of the Religion”), female and male Cardinals, Bishops, and a “Vatican in Vietnam” made of 65 different religious offices, schools, hospitals, workshops and funeral homes. The head spirit medium, Phạm Công Tắc, was called the *Hộ Pháp*, “Defender of the Dharma”, and he became Caodaism’s most charismatic and controversial leader.

Today, some Caodaists call Phạm Công Tắc “the Mahatma of Vietnam”, since he like Gandhi, used Orientalism against empire: He used ideas of Eastern spirituality (embodied, for him, in the image of the left eye – closer to the heart, but also yang – positive, dynamic, and masculine) to oppose Western materialism (embodied in the right eye – a rationality without ethics, also dark and destructive). By inverting the Orientalist stereotype of a passive, feminized east (Said 1978), he re-imagined Vietnamese religion as a dynamic masculine monotheism that could encompass Western religious teachings into the culmination of religious unity. He also traveled to the Geneva peace talk to lobby against the partition of his homeland. But he, like Gandhi, was unsuccessful in this struggle, and ended up fleeing arrest by the



Ngô Đình Diệm government and dying in exile in Cambodia in 1959.

DIASPORA AND ITS THEORIES

In 1975, when Saigon fell, thousands of Caodaists fled the country. Many of them in the “first wave” in 1975 were young professionals (doctors, engineers, computer scientists, pharmacists) who had assisted the former regime or the American forces. A few more senior religious leaders came as well, including a former Ambassador who has also co-founded a teaching center in Saigon. One of the most famous was a little girl named Kim Phúc, who had been photographed running out the of Caodai temple in Trang Bang in 1971, and who eventually settled in Canada (Chong 2000).



Kim Phúc running from a Caodai temple in 1971 after napalm was dropped.

For about twenty-five years, Caodaism was virtually closed down in Vietnam – most of its 1300 temples boarded up, vacant, gathering dust. People prayed in their homes, but were not allowed to gather to celebrate religious holidays. Caodai schools, workshops and offices were nationalized and used to “re-educate” the politically incorrect followers of this “reactionary” religion (Blagov 2001) The many scattered communities of Vietnamese overseas gradually collected themselves into ethnic enclaves in California, Texas, the Washington DC area, New Orleans, Montreal, Sydney and Paris. By the 1990s they formed a diasporic religion, with a network of several dozen temples, websites, and volumes of new spirit messages published on the Internet from 2000 on. They published books and pamphlets arguing that “Caodaism needed to be kept alive by the overseas community” (Phan 1991, 2), since it was oppressed and paralyzed by the communist government in Vietnam (Jammes 2009).

Paul Christopher Johnson argues that diasporas “make religions” firstly by dislodging religious practices from their embedded, unspoken status and making them a discrete object of contemplation (Johnson 2007). Which rituals can be revived in another land and which must be discarded? This needs to be re-negotiated in a new context. Secondly, they require public recognition and usually the translation and publication of religious texts. Thirdly, they require new spatial coordinates – from ceremonies held in apartment living rooms to the construction of new temples and cultural centers. And lastly, they catalyze new forms, sources, sites and brokers of the sacred. A female spirit medium emerged as the founder of the first Caodai temple in California, and she received messages from Joseph Smith, tying Caodaism to America’s own “indigenous religion”, Mormonism.

Johnson argues that when a religious group “becomes diasporic”, it starts to view itself “against new historical and territorial horizons that change the configuration and meaning of its religious, ethnic and even racial identification in the present” (2007:3). Caodaists of the founding generation in French Indochina defined their new religion in contrast to the “colonial horizon” of French Catholicism and secular Free Masons. Fifty years later, refugees and immigrants in California had to re-define their religious activities to fit a system of Sunday services (instead of the twice monthly celebrations of the new moon and full moon ordered by the lunar calendar). They also had a “Christian majority horizon” within a religiously plural society with an even greater diversity of competing groups.

New encounters with Protestants and evangelicals, Hindus, Muslims, Baha’is, and Mormons changed the religious landscape in significant ways. As the practitioners of an overtly and proudly syncretic religion, Caodaists were challenged to articulate the connections their scriptures had to these other traditions. The temple in Pomona where I first encountered Caodaism, for example, now has wall plaques with quotes from the scriptures of Islam, Baha’i and the Church of Latter Day Saints, as well as Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and Christianity. All of the US temples fly the flag of the Saigon republic, marking their community as a continuation of a vanished state.

The memory of the past is transformed even as it is rebuilt in the new spaces of emigration. Despite the passionate desire of Tây Ninh Caodaists to “follow the divine blueprint” of their Great Temple overseas, there had to be many changes – in the materials used, the placement of glass in



the windows, limitations due to zoning laws of the numbers of colors which could be used on the outside. These physical changes of substance and shade mirror conceptual changes in how this vividly eclectic temple would be perceived in a conservative neighborhood in Orange County.

Maurice Halbwachs argued that the “materiality” of religion – its rites, costumes, architecture and offerings – provides the most stable component, since there can be multiple interpretations of ritual actions, and there is more splintering over doctrine than imagery (1992, 116; Johnson 2007, 46). While there are minor differences in Caodai iconography between Tây Ninh (which uses ancestral tablets before the great globe) and other denominations, like Bền Tre (which uses statues), all Caodai temples share a common visual vocabulary. Re-creating that distinctive religious architecture in California was tremendously important to emerging Caodai congregations, since it restored the “materiality” of Vietnamese ritual life, attaching symbols from the homeland to new sites in the hostland.

Diasporas have been defined as “social identifications based on shared memory bridges linking a lived space and a left-behind place” (Johnson 2007, 48). The “double consciousness” that Gilroy described for the Black Atlantic (1993) requires residing in two different places (at least in the imagination), and engaging with gaps in both space and time or memory. These gaps become a source of meaning in diasporic religion, through the ritualization of the idea of return. Distance from the homeland is seen as displacement and disempowering, and the function of ritual is to seek a momentary re-connection. For some strongly anti-communist Caodaists, any talk of returning to today’s Vietnam is seen as blasphemous, since it implicitly recognizes the legitimacy of the present government. But the impossibility of return to a real country intensifies the longing for the lost one, and the discourse of “purity in exile”.

I see a new direction in the more globally oriented Caodaists, who are moving from being a religion “in diaspora” to being a religion “of diaspora”. They are turning some of these gaps into strategic resources, which become positive and empowering. The multiple global sites of Caodai temples can become a transnational network of great value to not only to immigrants, helping them to settle in a new land, but also to returning pilgrims and religious leaders. They provide the basis for new creative exchanges and interactions, many of them carried out on the Internet, and they create a new cosmopolitan ideal. They can

embrace new non-Vietnamese converts, like Linda Blackenny-Hofstetter, an African-American nurse ordained as a Caodai minister (Lễ Sanh) in 2008.



Linda Blackenny Hofstetter's ceremony of ordination in 2008 in Pomona, California.

Since 2000, the Vietnamese government has recognized Caodai organizations, allowing them to re-open and renovate their temples to receive both disciples and visitors. The Great Temple in Tây Ninh has become one of the largest tourist destinations in southern Vietnam, with thousands of tourists visiting during the busy summer season. Religious holidays are celebrated on a large scale again: over 100,000 Caodaists now gather annually at the mid-Autumn Festival of the Mother Goddess. Caodaism has re-emerged on the public stage of southern Vietnam, and official publications list its followers as 3.2 million (Phạm Bích Hợp 2007). While it seems unlikely that Caodaists will serve as Presidents, ministers or advisors to the communist government (as they once did in the Saigon Republic), they are once again a very visible and active part of Vietnamese religious life in the south. Caodaism is growing in central Vietnam, and even has a small number of temples in Hanoi and other northern cities.

Communications, blocked for over twenty years between Vietnamese in the diaspora and those in the homeland, are now re-established, with over a million foreign Vietnamese visiting each year. The Hanoi government still blacks out religious websites with firewall when they protest human rights or religious freedom in Vietnam. Caodaists have not been as visible as Catholic and Buddhist dissidents, but they have protested the fact that they are still not able to return to the Religious Constitution of 1926 or hold spirit seances in their temples. The religion is visible, but still strictly regulated, and religious leaders practice strenuous self-censorship in the hopes of continuing the process of normalization.



The 2006 return of the body of Phạm Công Tắc, the most famous 20th century Caodaist and a founding spirit medium, was heralded by some as a major turning point, but seen by others as a deceptive ploy to convince the US State Department that Vietnam was no longer a “country of particular concern” for religious freedom (Hoskins 2012c). For a younger generation of educated Vietnamese, the idea of studying and traveling overseas has become so alluring that diasporic communities are envied intensely. While many Vietnamese in California may dream of returning to visit their “roots”, others in Ho Chi Minh City want desperately to be part of an international community. The two sides of the Pacific are now linked by dense networks of remittances, some of them channeled through temples and religious networks, but most of them circulating between family members (Small 2012, Thai 2014). Vietnamese remittance recipients depend on funding sent from “over there” (*ở bên kia*) to build new houses, educate the younger generation, and nourish international aspirations. The syncretistic, totalizing theology of Caodaism provides a basis for linkages and travel in both directions.

SYNCRETISM AND DIASPORA: CONTRASTING CONCEPTS

The study of syncretism is the study of how religious difference has been managed: by separation, by opposition, by the erection of strict boundaries and territories (as has been the tendency of the Abrahamic religions, under the banner of an exclusivist monotheism) or by incorporation, by fusion, by emphasizing common elements and finding certain overarching themes (as has been the tendency of more fluid Asian traditions). Fluidity should not, however, be equated with incoherence. In Asian tradition, it is articulated in relation to hierarchical principles. A syncretistic religion is not a religion where “anything goes”. It is one in which differences receive less emphasis than an all-encompassing unity, and new religious elements are ranked and given their place under a wider umbrella.

Syncretism brings together disparate religious traditions in one place, creating a particular “package” in which elements are re-ordered in a specific way, related to the needs of religious actors in a particular historical context. Vietnamese colonized intellectuals hoped to fuse Chinese, French and Vietnamese elements into a coherent belief system which would systematize all of the religious teachings found in 20th century Saigon. Syncretism therefore seeks intellectual unity and cohesion by fusing teachings from

different times and places that come to coexist in a single locality.

When followers of a particular religion are spread out in a diaspora, this package is exported to new places. The spatial dispersion of believers motivates each smaller community to re-examine its faith and practices in a new context. Diaspora is a new term that has emerged in the globalized world of compressed time and space, however, where modern social media have made it possible for diasporic religious followers to remain part of a “shared conversation” even across great geographic distances. The syncretistic impetus of the founders of Caodaism was to create spiritual unity in one place. Diasporic dispersal links a diversity of places to a single spiritual “home”.

The processes would seem to be opposites – one compresses conceptual differences into unity, while the other unifies different locations through a common “origin”. But what they both share is the fact that they provide models for managing and overcoming religious differences and geographical challenges. Facing the colonial “crisis of meaning” in French Indochina, early Caodaists found ways of enlisting both Asian sages and prominent French figures in the defense of their own right to self-determination. Facing the tragic displacement of exile, refugees bound together and forged new ties to an idealized homeland in order to regenerate a sense of community and mission in the New World.

It would be accurate to describe members of the founding generation of 1926 as “syncretizers”, since each of them developed an idiosyncratic “package” within the larger framework of Caodai theology. And it would also be accurate to describe their successors among those who emigrated in 1975 as “diapsoric”, since each of them formulated a particular way of re-connecting to a spiritual homeland through activism in Caodai networks overseas. But I am also convinced by the strong sense that each one of these people – following a teacher, a father or a grandfather – was also engaged in a parallel process of re-assessment, self-questioning and self-cultivation. While separated by half a century of history and the world’s widest ocean, these paired figures were following similar pathways and showed a strong loyalty to a sense of ancestral heritage.

Syncretism and diaspora are not so different after all.

Diasporas re-work the idea of a national culture from a distance, through the lens of exile. In today’s world they interact and influence the home country, not only through remittances, but



also through cultural exchanges. They evoke a remembered past, but re-work it in order to move it into the future. The diasporic project is an imaginative rehearsal of what isn't but could be.

CONCLUSIONS

My title, of course, is drawn from Andre Gunder Frank's provocative and prophetic 1998 book on the global economy in the Asian age. This paper examines the relationship between Asia and North America through another lens: that of theology, theories of religious mixing which attempt to bridge the great civilizational divides of the 21st century.

For immigrants and exiles, diaspora can be constructed as a narrative of "crossing and dwelling" (Tweed 2006), in which movement through space is given meaning by ideas of a transcendent connection to "home," making the longed for land of origin into a "holy land" (*thánh địa*) of universal importance. Diasporas themselves "make new religions" by creating the conditions for more syncretism through dialogues between followers of different religious traditions. In fact, Caodaism could realistically be called a syncretic religious machine for producing and re-affirming diasporic sentiments, a religion that includes diaspora as

one of its most significant doctrines, and – to some extent – a belief system that draws on religious notions of diaspora and updates them to the 21st century to create a global syncretism. In this sense, it is itself a fascinating and innovative diasporic formation.

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