

# A CRITICAL ANALYSIS IN QUEST OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CAODAISM AND NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS: COMPARISON AND APPRAISAL

Dr. Mohammad Jahangir Alam\*

## Abstract

*Dao Cao Dai or Caodaism appears as a distinct tradition although it proceeds from the blending of the Great Traditions of the East and the West. These long-established traditions are mostly found to have made a significant and lasting contribution to Vietnamese cultural spaces. In such a social and cultural milieu Caodaism, together with different new religious movements, emerged primarily as a secret socio-religious movement in French Cochinchina in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The primary objective of this paper is to provide a partial summary of diverse circumstances in which new religious movements emerge even due to the presence of a bias against them. Thus, this paper proceeds by presenting some of the different socio-historical contexts on the basis of which new religious movements emerged. In addition, this is an attempt of the current paper that can help us explain and evaluate the socio-historical facts of the origin of new religious movements in order to understand their common features and the manners by which new religious movements come into agreement with Caodaism. Methodologically, we used the approach of critical discourse analysis to understand the socio-historical relationship between Caodaism and New Religious Movements (NRMs). The findings show a strong eschatological character based on which Caodaism comes into agreement with most of the New Religions. At the same time, these findings show some meaningful differences between Caodaism and NRMs. This paper concludes with a brief discussion about how Caodaism tends to be quite simple regarding its doctrines and ceremonies like New Religions.*

**Key Words:** Caodaism, new religious movement, three great teachings, Cochinchina, third amnesty of God, and syncretic religion

## Introduction

Sociologically, diverse circumstances are responsible for the emergence of new religious movements. This may be termed a common

---

\* Associate Professor, alam9363@gmail.com

phenomenon of contemporary new religious movements. There are many reasons to think about why this phenomenon of contemporary religious movements has caught the attention of the press, public, and social scientists (Rochford, 2007). According to McGuire (1997), this situation may happen only because of a diverse, colorful, or strange assortment of religious groups. As he argues, the types of characteristics of emerging religious movements are related to their cultural settings. For him, emerging religious movements develop different types of social organization and specific religious orientations that are particularly well-suited to the modern social structural places of religion. His assessment comes in agreement with Kim Knott's understanding of contemporary religion. As Knott (2005) examines, there is a possibility to develop a relationship between religions and the physical, social, and cultural arenas in which it is situated. In addition, at a certain stage there develops dynamic relations between religions and different features of spaces (social, cultural, physical, political, and economic), the place of religion in their structure, its active and passive modes, and its possibilities for dominance, resistance, and liberation. McGuire (1997) further points out that the new religious movements appear anomalous. As he has identified the main reason, they emerge precisely at a time when previously established religions seem to be the weakest. But this reason may neither be equally applicable to Caodaism nor to Vietnamese *Three Great Teachings*.<sup>1</sup> As far as the emergence of Caodaism is concerned, it appears as a distinct tradition although it proceeds from the blending of the *Great Traditions* of the East and the West.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, for many scholars, these long-established traditions are mostly found to have made a significant and lasting contribution to Vietnamese cultural spaces. In such a social and cultural milieu Caodaism, together with different new religious movements<sup>3</sup>, emerged primarily as a secret socio-religious movement in French Cochinchina.<sup>4</sup> However, in our next attempts we will

---

<sup>1</sup> Three Great Teachings refer to Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. For good discussion, see *The Teachings of the Great Way*, pp. 35-37 (2015).

<sup>2</sup> Great Traditions of the East and West embodies Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

<sup>3</sup> Alongside Caodaism, there were different new religious movements in the South of Vietnam such as Minh Ly and Hoa Hao. Hoa Hao is a politico-religious sect that was officially founded in 1939 by Huynh Phu So.

<sup>4</sup> Indochina (present Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos) fell fully under French colonial control in 1893. Cochinchina referred to the whole of Vietnam, but it was commonly

explore the common nature of the origin of new religions, major factors that work in their development, and how the concept of ‘new’ comes up with an idea whether Caodaism is a new religion. In the end, this paper makes a comparison and appraisal with a view to finding the points of agreement between Caodaism and new religious movements.

### **Sources of new religious movements: a short historical overview**

Historically, new religions arose during periods of change, uncertainty, and dissatisfaction. As the scholars argue, for many, the formal, standardized and traditional religions failed to provide answers to the problems of modern existence. Thus, dissatisfaction with the disagreements and seeming irrelevance to much of modern life which characterized the established religions helped to pave the way for the popularity of the New Religions. Notably, in the development of such New Religions, some major factors are recurrent. With special reference to H. Neill McFarland (1923-2017), Straelen (1963) shows that at least five factors work behind the development of the New Religions such as (1) social crisis intensified by an intrusive (disturbing) culture, (2) a charismatic leader, (3) apocalyptic signs and wonders, (4) ecstatic behavior, and (5) syncretic doctrine. As he further mentions, in the words of anthropologist Margeret Mead, the milieu from which the New Religions arise, is the ‘ferment of half-abandoned old and half-understood new’.<sup>5</sup> With regard to the same issue, Robbins and Lucas (2007) present Eileen Barker’s (1938) argument. The major thread of her argument runs as follows: “the fact of chronological ‘newness’ is indeed sociologically significant because chronologically and organizationally ‘new’ movements tend to share certain typical and important features such as charismatic

---

used to refer to the South of Vietnam, while Annam and Tonkin were referred to the Central and the North of Vietnam respectively. For a detailed study, see *Vietnam: A History* (1983).

<sup>5</sup> Eileen Barker has argued forcefully that the fact of chronological ‘newness’ is indeed sociologically significant because chronologically and organizationally ‘new’ movements tend to share certain typical, important features such as charismatic leadership, a first generation membership of ‘converts’, a primary reliance on proselytization rather than birth rate to sustain growth, intense intra-group ties, and a significant degree of tension with mainstream society. For a detailed study, see *Modern Japanese Religions*, p. 33 (1963).

leadership, a first generation membership of ‘converts’, a primary reliance on proselytization rather than the birth rate to sustain growth, intense intragroup ties, and a significant degree of tension with mainstream society” (Barker, 1938 as cited in Robbins & Lucas, 2007, p. 228). At this point, if we analyse the emergence of Caodaism we can see that all the factors mentioned above did not necessarily work in the development of Caodaism. For Caodaism, rather its increasing appeal, undeniable vitality, and continued expansion are related to its development that causes a new appraisal.

As Ellwood (1978) shows, the two main sources of new religious movements are the Judeo-Christian heritage and the more formless nonofficial religious area or cultic milieu. The Judeo-Christian strain is a fertile source of new religions because of its built-in tendency for cycles of renewal, reform, and schism. Most ideas and many ritual practices of numerous new religions were already present in the cultic milieu, but the new movements shaped the ideas and adherents into an organized form. Some new religious movements claim to be new; others emphasize that they are older even than historical religions such as Christianity. As per Cao Dai theology and cosmology, revelation began with a Great Way and ends with the third and final stage of the Great Way that is called *Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do* i.e., Third Amnesty of God in the East or Third Revelation of the Great Way or The Great Way of Third Universal Salvation.<sup>6</sup> Thus, understood Caodaism does not claim to be totally new. Historically, Caodaism is deeply rooted in Sino-Vietnamese culture. And thereby, it may not be in any absolute sense a new ideology, for its basic tenet is monotheism (Matin, 2006) corresponds to Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Bahai convictions and on the other hand, the spiritist sources and its doctrinal characters are in agreement with Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism etc. Therefore, monotheistic, polytheistic tendencies and the primitive notions of divinity work together within the belief system of Caodaism.<sup>7</sup> This is how Cao Dai religion has become an outstanding example of a working syncretism. Thus, it rather claims to be a harmonious synthesis of great teachings (Gobron, 1950).

---

<sup>6</sup> For a good discussion visit <http://www.daotam.info/booksv/CaoDaiTuDien/>

<sup>7</sup> The Cao Dai adherents believe in the Mother Goddess and various types of spirits alongside One Supreme Being.

The same phenomenon of religious syncretism has appeared in McGuire's (1997) observation. He shows that many new religions borrow from Eastern religions such as Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, various Hindu forms of yoga and meditation, or Sikh, Sufi, and Taoist traditions. Other emerging movements borrow heavily from Celtic lore (Indo-European folklore), Native American religions, and Shamanism. Nevertheless, as a social phenomenon even the more exotic new religions have their roots in identifiable clusters of prior beliefs and practices (MacDonald, 1995). Many of the most successful new religious movements, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons, are organized on firmly patriarchal lines with an all-male leadership. It should be noted that the early nineteenth century saw many religious and communal experiments. The New Age has rekindled interest in the Goddess principle, placing it in a feminist context. Women are also prominent among the fully engaged participants in the New Age. The emergence of Caodaism in the early twentieth century revived the same interest and curiosity in the Goddess principle alongside the principle of Supreme God. Thus, within Caodaism itself, it is significant that women have had leadership roles offering a new order of both esoteric and exoteric interpretations of Caodaism.

### **Concept of new religious movements and Caodaism**

As soon as mention is made of New Religions, the problem of terminology or delimitation arises. The problem centers on two questions relating to the meaning of "new," which is considered to be a very relative term. In terms of time, how *new* is new? At what point the new becomes old? In what precise classification does Caodaism belong? As precise demarcation is always difficult it is not possible to say whether Caodaism is a new religion or reformed Buddhism or a new religious movement. Since this study concerns the relationship between Caodaism and "New Religious Movements", the explicit content of the term need not cause a problem. The term is rather used as a convenient designation for all the religions included in this investigation. As far as "new religion" is concerned, the question is: Can Caodaism really be called "new"? Steyn (2013) in his book *New Religious Movements* shows three different time frames relating to the emergence of new religions. According to him, some

scholars use the Second World War to separate old and new religions, while others prefer using the year 1950 as the watershed. But with special reference to Melton, Moore, (1982) and Beckford (1985) identify the real rise of NRMs as having occurred during the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, according to his observation, if we link the term “new” to any one of the specific dates mentioned, we cannot define Caodaism as a recent phenomenon. We can, therefore, say that Caodaism is no longer a new religion, but rather an old tradition.

### **Caodaism and new religious movements: comparison and appraisal**

To characterize the New Religions, their particular teaching, importance, ceremonies, and sacred writings are especially considered. Here, it is important to note that new religious movements make full use of group psychology by offering both informal small-group meetings and elaborate mass assemblies. Most of them are highly centralized in their organizational structure. A few of them may have militaristic disciplines. All of them use modern mass media for communication. They also attract and maintain relationships with a large number of followers. For the most part, these new religions draw their adherents from the lower middle class, or peasant class, especially middle-aged and older women, although a few of them claim to have some followers among the upper middle class and young people as well. Thus, there are a number of similarities that are evident in a comparison of many of the New Religions with Caodaim.<sup>8</sup>

In comparison with such New Religions, Caodaism neither has any human founder nor savior. Rather Caodaism claims that God himself is the Savior who talks to humanity directly.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, we can compare

---

<sup>8</sup> The foundress of *Dai Hizen-kyo*, Mrs. Nami Orimo, claims that the highest deity of the universe had descended upon her, and Kiyomi Miyaoka, the founder of *Sei Kyokai*, twice experienced a divine descent upon him. For a good discussion visit <http://www.centreofloveandenlightenment.net/articles/what-is-a-descension/>.

<sup>9</sup> Regarding this 3rd revelation (the revelation of God for the third time) Cao Dai (God) said: "Before I founded Caodaism I sent Angels, Saints, Immortals, and Buddhas to all over the world to promote religious unity." See Cao Dai: A Way to Harmony. Retrieved from [www.daotam.info](http://www.daotam.info). In another message God mentioned: "...I have now firmly resolved to come Myself to show you the Way". See *Thanh Ngon Hiep Tuyen*, Q.1 [The Collection of Divine Messages, Vol. 1]. Retrieved from [www.daotam.info](http://www.daotam.info).

some early disciples of Caodaism with the founders of New Religions with a view to understanding some common points. As per scholars of NRMs, the founders of New Religions are usually proficient in spiritual science. Mystical experiences are common with them through which they commune i.e., in a metaphorical sense, engage in conversation with gods, demons, and ancestral spirits (Steyn, 2013). The difference is that the early disciples of Cao Dai did not seek to commune with gods or demons rather different categories of spirits including the Supreme Spirit (Duc Cao Dai). They did not claim miraculous powers of healing like many of the founders of New Religions. Notably, in regard to the organization, Caodaism differs from many of the New Religions. Caodaism, for example, maintains the traditional hierarchy which distinguishes dignitaries and believers while many of the New Religions have rejected such hierarchy. As a syncretic religion, Caodaism comes into agreement with the New Religions. As Straelan (1963) notes, the majority of the New Religions are syncretistic to a greater or lesser degree. Teachings and practices from various other religions or philosophical systems are freely incorporated into their scheme. This process of NRMs, however, marks a continuation with other older religions (Hunt, 2002). However, in the case of Caodaism, it is assumed that during its whole history the adherents have shown a pronounced undogmatic tendency together with great flexibility and adaptability of mind. This characteristic is, in fact, common in the majority of the New Religions.

---

Reverend Thuong Canh Thanh, President of Cao Dai Overseas Missionary views: “To us Cao Dai (Caodaists), Ngo Minh Chieu is the first disciple, not the founder, because all the foundation of the religion (Sacred Texts: *Phap Chanh Truyen*, *Tan Luat*, *Bat Dao Nghi Dinh*, and Rites, Prayers, etc...) came via divine messages, from God and other Divinities, and not from Ngo Minh Chieu. Ngo Minh Chieu was remembered to see the Divine Eye for us to use as the symbol of the religion”.

In supporting Rev. Thanh which another Cao Dai scholar explains: “The Divine Message on Christmas Eve 1925, The Jade Emperor (God) named his first 12 disciples of whom Mr. Ngô Văn Chiêu was named first. This means that Ngô Văn Chiêu was merely the first disciple. All holy documents in Caodaism, for example The Scriptures, New Canonical Codes, Constitution of Caodaism and other instructions were given by the Jade Emperor and other divinities through spiritism, not by Ngô Văn Chiêu. All of this proves that the Jade Emperor is the Founder of Caodaism”. Sources: Rev. Thuong Canh Thanh and Mr. Tuan Em (personal communication, April 26, 2022).

## Conclusion

In sum, a special feature of the new religions, which draws many people to them, is that their leaders give a kind of personal guidance to the believers. In the case of Caodaism, Ngo Van Chieu (1878-1932), Le Van Trung (1875-1934) and His Holiness Ho Phap Pham Cong Tac (1890-1959), the Defender of the Law, were concerned with the same role.<sup>10</sup> Like New Religions, Caodaism tends to be quite simple regarding its doctrines and ceremonies. Moreover, Caodaism comes into agreement with most of the New Religions regarding a strong eschatological character. The New Religions point to a bright and cheerful life sometime in the future in this world. As they believe, when the messianic time has approached a kind of heaven on earth or a peaceful and happy, ever so happy, the welfare state will come into existence. With special reference to Ensuke Konno's "Nihonjin no Shuzoku Meishin"<sup>11</sup> as Straelen views, "Among the New Religions, however, there are those which, because of doctrine, size, or history, are more representative and important than others. Some of these New Religions have reached the stage of development and they have been classified as established religion" (1963, p. 38). Thus, on the basis of his view we can consider Caodaism as an established religion because when we speak of Caodaism we refer to it as an organized religion like Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. In fact, like Caodaism the simple, direct, and practical beliefs and practices of new religions equally appeal to the masses who do not feel at home with the complex doctrines of established religions.

---

<sup>10</sup> It is known that some early Cao Dai leaders were very well versed in both Asian classics and western spiritualism. Notably, Ngo Van Chieu, the first disciple of Caodaism, Le Van Trung, its first acting pope, and Ho Phap Pham Cong Tac, its longest-reigning leader and defender of the law or religion, appeared to be very prominent leaders in Cao Dai history.

<sup>11</sup> In Japanese *Nihonjin no* means "Japanese", *Shuzoku* means "Customs", and *Meishin* means "Superstitions". Thus, the title *Nihonjin no Shuzoku Meishinn* means Japanese Customs and Superstitions. It should be mentioned that there are many kinds of books (volumes) about Japanese Life and each volume is written by a different author. The book of *Nihonjin no Shuzoku Meishinn*, for example, is one of them (Volume 5 of Complete Works of Japanese Life) written by Konno Ensuke. Source: T. Amano (personal communication, November 26, 2001).



## Notes and References

- Center for Studies in Caodaism. (2002). *Thanh Ngon Hiep Tuyen, Q.1 [The Collection of Divine Messages*, Vol. 1]. Retrieved from <https://www.daotam.info>
- Ellwood, R. S. Jr. (1978). Emergent religion in America: a historical perspective. In Needleman and G. Baker (Eds.) *Understanding the new religions* (267-284). New York, NY: Seabury Press.
- Hunt, J. S. (2002). *Religion in western society*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Karnow, S. (1983). *Vietnam: a history*. New York, NY: Viking Press.
- Knott, K. (2005). *The location of religion: a spatial analysis*. London: Equinox Publishing Ltd.
- Matin, A. (2006). *An outline of philosophy*. Dhaka: Adhuna Prakashan.
- MacDonald, J. L. (1995). Inventing traditions for the new age: a case study of the earth energy tradition. *Anthropology of Consciousness*, 6(4), 31-45.
- McGuire, M. B. (1997). *Religion: the social context* (4th ed.). Belmont, Calif: Wadsworth Pub. Co.
- Robbins, T. & Lucas, P.C. (2007). From 'cults' to new religious movements: coherence, definition, and conceptual framing in the study of new religious movements. In J. Beckford and N.J. Demerath (Eds.) *The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (227-247). London: Sage Publications.
- Rochford, E. B. Jr. (2007). The sociology of new religious movements. In Anthony J. Blasi (Ed.), *American Sociology of Religion*. Boston: Brill.
- Steyn, H. C. (2013). *New religious movements, cults, new age and related phenomena*. Pretoria: University of South Africa.
- Straelen, H. V. (1963). *Modern Japanese religions*. Tokyo: Rupert Enderle.
- Trang, T. V. (2015). *The teachings of the great way* (H. T. Hum Bui & C. H. Dang Bui, Trans.). The Sacerdotal Council. (Original work published 1959). Retrieved from <https://www.daotam.info>

