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RELIGIOUS INTEGRATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF CAODAIISM: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

The formative stage of Cao Dai religion is closely connected to Vietnamese traditional myths, tales, doctrines and practices that are mostly transmitted orally down to the centuries. At the same time, Caodaism constantly maintained its links with religio-cultural elements of Chinese, Indian and Western origin. Due to this fact, Caodaism, with its synthesis of Eastern, Southeast Asian, Indian and Western elements specially from indigenous folk tales, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Christianity, appeared as the religion of an acclaimed small group in 1926. This paper aims to examine how Caodaism evolved by a long-term process of Western and Asian acculturation. Thus, first to be considered is the significant role of socio-

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historical factors in creating a strong footing for the progress of Caodaism in Vietnam at the beginning of the early 20th century. Second, the process of Vietnamese acculturation is taken into consideration through which Caodaism borrowed diverse elements from different resources around it. Methodologically, a critical discourse analysis is adopted to consider the characteristics of Caodaism and its socio-historical structure that is required to understand its historical origin and development. In conclusion, first, the study clearly demonstrates the close connection between Caodaism and the major factors of acculturation such as integration and assimilation for its development and diffusion around the South of Vietnam. Second, the current problem demands a careful consideration of some other crucial factors that might have influenced the rise and progress of Caodaism since its official journey in 1926.

Keywords: acculturation, integration, assimilation, social milieu, flexibility and consolidation, tam giao, compromising stance

Introduction

As we see, historical necessity demands the origin of a religion with a view to reinforcing social unity and stability that is also true for Caodaism. History tells us that the first quarter of the 20th century of Vietnam underwent social instability when the country was in a state of political turmoil and great crisis of social justice and security. Indeed, such a critical situation demanded the origin of a religion like Caodaism i.e., the national or native religion of Vietnam. (Werner, 1976 & Chapman, 2006) Going further, Caodaism emerged as a syncretic Vietnamese religious movement (Blagov, 1999) when various developments took place in the 1920's in Cochinchina-then the South of Vietnam, a

colony of French Indochina. Scholars have shown that right after Caodaism's inauguration in 1926, it was seriously threatened by challenges from the French Colonial powers, also from political corruption and internal factions. The internal threats are historically reported to have come primarily from political corruption within the Cao Dai church in Tay Ninh (Smith, 1970 & Jammes, 2010). The point is that the overall socio-political situation in the South of Vietnam influenced the gradual progress of Caodaism directly or indirectly. (Werner, 1976 & Tai, 1992) However, although Caodaism found itself in a real predicament that had a largely negative impact upon its growth, the religion shaped and ensured resistance to threats and problems. With regard to this common social phenomenon, a new religion places its new ideology as central to shaping its social space and identity. Many studies of new religions are found to have noted the significance of inner power of a new ideology, as Daljeet Singh views:

No doubt, the environmental situation and the social milieu in which a religion arises do have their impact on its growth and the problems it seeks to tackle. Yet, it is very true that the perceptions, the internal strength, and the ideology of a religion are fundamentally the elements that give it substance and direction, and shape its personality. (Singh, 1984, p.1)

It is worth mentioning that Singh's observation shows how the inner power and the principles of a particular belief system help it to adapt to changing circumstances over time. Moreover, this viewpoint suggests that it is evident for most belief systems of culture. Thus, in the same way, the same fundamental elements gave Caodaism its substance and direction and ultimately shaped its identity that, for Jammes (2016), constituted an

important force on the twentieth-century Vietnamese socio-political landscape. As Hoskins viewed: “Religious innovation always struggles against an established order that attempts to absorb or suppress it, but in a colonial context this struggle took on additional implications.” (Hoskins, 2012, pp. 239-266) What Hoskins especially wants to emphasize in this regard, is that of the political involvement of Caodaism in different periods from 1930-1956. Historically, the Caodaists were bound to take and change their sides for their existence. (Alam, 2020) Thus, ultimately and fundamentally, for Jammes, “Fighting for its existence, Caodaism had been able to build up its position so that it could not easily be eradicated by its opponents.” (Jammes 2009, pp. 339-358) At this point, there are good reasons for accepting his view. It is certainly true for Caodaism that diverse deeply implanted Vietnamese cultural roots actually served as a strong base for syncretic origin of Caodaism (Oliver, 1976) to survive against all opposition i.e., socio-political odds; and religious integration in Vietnamese society (specially the south) gave a pace in the continuous progress of Caodaism. It stands to reason that this strong foundation actually helped Cao Dai religion to assimilate all borrowed elements into its own in the matrix of a distinct Vietnamese socio-historical identity. Thus, in order to appraise the specific cases of the religious integration and the development of Caodaism, it is valuable to look into the social construction, flexibility and consolidation, and the socio-historical perspectives of Caodaism in Vietnam.

Methodology and data collection method

As a qualitative research method, a critical discourse analysis approach is used in the current field of research with a view to

analyzing and assessing social issues relevant to the formation process of Caodaism and its development. The present research has been conducted primarily by using secondary sources. Thus, as research materials, published research articles, books and doctoral theses have been taken into consideration to develop arguments in terms of the current problem and consider the socio-historical and cultural contexts in which Caodaism is developed as a synthesis of some Eastern and Western religions.

Socio-historical overview of religious integration and Caodaism

Although Chinese cultural elements began to penetrate into Vietnam in the 6th century B.C., the presence and influence of Chinese culture is perceived as predominant in Vietnam since the early stages of the Christian era. History tells us that Chinese Buddhism entered into Vietnam in the 2nd half of the 1st Christian era while religions of Chinese origin arrived in Vietnam long before the penetration of Buddhism in Vietnam. (Karnow, 1983 & Oliver, 1976) At this point, it should be mentioned that Buddhism was developed as a new synthesis of culture in China. (Smart, 1989) Thus, evidence shows that Buddhism arrived in Vietnam as a syncretic form.

However, historical evidence indicates that Indian missionaries first brought Buddhism to Vietnam as early as the first century A.D.

As it is recorded that Indian Buddhist monks likely came to Vietnam first before traveling to southern China. (Minh, 2006) However, it is documented that the process of evangelization began only towards the end of the second century A.D. with

the presence of Chinese refugee scholars in the Red River delta region of the North of Vietnam. (Anh, 1993) As Buddhism is a missionary religion, it did not waste time to convert followers. One of the major factors that played a crucial role for Buddhism in reorienting Vietnamese societies very radically was the Buddhist assimilation. As compared to Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism were not assimilative in their approaches. Thus, they did not have any mission in proselytizing to convert followers the way Buddhism carried on its mission in a very successful way. As a result of the syncretic nature of Buddhism developed in China, it appeared in Vietnamese society as a new mixture of cultures. In addition to the penetration of foreign elements i.e., European culture and religion (French in particular), a considerable number of migrations took place in Vietnam due to a new economic affluence during the colonialist rule in the 19th century. Here the features of Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Christianity and particularly their structures are briefly investigated and interpreted in the matrix of Vietnamese social milieu. As the features of a particular religion and its structure are connected with the background of its origin and development, it requires a thorough study and interpretation of that particular religion from socio-historical perspectives for two purposes. First, it is possible to identify basic characteristics of a religious group and its social settings. Second, the nature of the structures of a particular society is recognized. Thus, by this method it is also possible to identify the characteristic functions of a society that affected and stimulated the constant progress of Caodaism since the early 20th century. In this particular case it is important to mark the points of intersection of interrelation and interaction between Caodaism and Vietnamese society. This is the nature of the sociology of Caodaism that confirms the interrelationship

and interaction of Caodaism and its society. In this regard, a critical analysis from a social perspective may be used. Vrijhop analyzes Wach's view in terms of the issue and sums up: "Religion is an integrating factor in human society, expressing itself in myth, dogma, cult and religious grouping" (Vrijhop, 1967, p. 33). Now the question is: How did Caodaism function as an integrating factor in Vietnamese society? As the structure of Southern Vietnamese society was complex as compared to the North, the development of Cao Dai religion underwent the process of acculturation. In addition to Vietnamese traditional elements, Caodaism absorbed diverse foreign elements and incorporated into its own through the process of acculturation. Therefore, it may be argued that Cao Dai religion has developed its own idiosyncratic doctrines for the Caodaists the way Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism and Christianity developed their own doctrines for the Taoists, Confucians, Buddhists and Christians.

At this point it is important to mention that the scope of the emergence of a new belief system is created in a specific social condition when old conceptions and institutions usually lose their meaning and importance (Wach, 1949). Caodaism, as a harmonious synthesis of old conceptions, developed a new homogeneous community in the South of Vietnam where old conceptions in terms of religions might have lost their meaning. As the society in the South of Vietnam is not culturally differentiated, the early backgrounds of the converts were mostly homogeneous. This is mostly common for a new faith which addresses its messages primarily to a group of people who are more or less homogeneous. In this regard, Wach argues: "The preaching of a new faith is addressed primarily to one group of people which may be more or less homogeneous. In culturally

higher differentiated societies, the background of converts is often very heterogeneous.” (1949, p. 36) As per his argument, we may assume that an integration of a homogeneous group may take place under a new faith where some social factors may influence in integrating a community. However, in case of the integration of Cao Dai religious group, it is also true that existing social conditions of the South of Vietnam both favored and hindered the progress of the Cao Dai community. Ultimately and fundamentally, we assume that different types of social factors might have contributed to the integration of the Cao Dai community. In the case of integrating the Cao Dai community, it was relatively easy as the new converts found borrowed elements identical to the old conceptions. Another point is that Caodaism also shared its followers the same cultic ties. For example, Cao Dai religion emerged on the basis of Vietnamese traditional folk beliefs and a great deal of *tam giao* (three great teachings of Vietnam), the resultant blend (Oliver, 1976) that were identical to the new converts. On the contrary, modern Vietnamese scholars are reported to have argued that the emergence of Caodaism showed the viability of Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism and Christianity in Vietnam. To some extent, various social movements of the syncretic type are found to have interceded for Caodaism in Vietnam. They too were considered offshoots of the Tam Giao tradition. It is, thus, widely believed that Caodaism is fundamentally and deliberately a syncretic religion. Notably, Caodaism has been perceived as syncretistic in its organizational structures, philosophy, theology and ritual practices. Moreover, for Berling (1980), syncretism which may be tentatively defined as the borrowing, affirmation or integration of concepts, symbols or practices of one religious tradition into another by a process of selection and reconciliation

(cited in Blagov, 2001), has been central to the religious life of the Vietnamese. Furthermore, it has been argued that religious synthesis would be valid only when it integrated disparate elements from different traditions while fully retaining their original definitions, overtones, connotations, and associations. (Berling, 1980) Syncretic borrowing, for Blagov (2001), may not be entirely conscious, but it was not a hypocritical manipulation.

It should be mentioned that much academic work in this area has been concerned with native origin of Caodaism and its syncretic elements. It was never the intention of the scholars of such academic works on Southeast Asian religion and culture to undermine Caodaism. However, some comments may bother Cao Dai scholars, historians and commoners if Caodaism is underestimated by considering it a “salad-religion” or *Dao Salade*. In this regard, it should be mentioned, for example, how a Caodaist historian reacted when his religion is called *Dao Salade*. Not surprisingly, he strongly disagreed with claims that his religion was a “salad-religion” (*Dao Salade*) or a by-product of political plots by the French or Japanese. According to that historian, Caodaism is not a product of syncretic borrowing, rather, he sees his religion as a new religion and continues to see it as a totally new order. (Tan, 1974, cited in Blagov, 2001) In addition, as per our understanding of Caodaism, we may agree with him on this point of his argument. It is certainly true that although the idea of religious syncretism remains widespread and popular, this point makes it plain that there is no good reason to see Caodaism as a “salad-religion” or a backlash of any political plots by the invaders. Nevertheless, people would see that Caodaism is not exactly considered a syncretic religion. Rather, Vietnam’s traditional grassroots syncretism was enriched by the coming of Caodaism.

The social construction of Caodaism

To begin with, the social construction of Caodaism deals with the issues such as its connections to popular forms of religion, ground of its political recognition, its criteria for being an organized form of religion, and integration process as a valid ground of its foundation, development and diffusion. The social construction of Caodaism lies in diverse roots, specifically evolving out of the traditional Vietnamese folktales. It is important to highlight that this is a common phenomenon for many religions to come out from their popular expression. At this point, what McGuire (1997) examines is that the roots of different religious groups are firmly connected to their popular culture. Historically, organized religions are found to be tightly connected to popular forms of religion in Vietnam. For example, like most organized religions in Vietnam, Caodaism is also found to be tightly linked with Vietnamese traditional beliefs, myths, tales, and practices that are mostly transmitted orally down to the centuries. (Jammes, 2010) In agreement with this phenomenon, what Smith holds is:

This connection was taken for granted largely because, at the time of the origin and growth of Cao Dai religion, especially since the mid-1920s, the official declaration of the new faith (1926) and its organization had successfully achieved politically legitimated cultural dominance throughout the South of Vietnam. (1970, pp. 335-49)

It is, therefore, evident that the social construction and structure of the Cao Dai religion closely resemble official religious models such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Bahai Faith. Indeed, it is equally true for both organized and unorganized forms of religion that more or less lie in syncretizing elements of their pre-existing belief systems. One thing should be focused

on with regard to the concept of religious syncretism. As we know from recent anthropological study, the notion of religious syncretism has been proved to be an authentic and accepted idea in the realm of religious study. Moreover, for modern critics, syncretism is considered as one of the most important factors of the acculturation process that contributes in setting up a strong footing of a religion in contemporary anthropology. (McGuire, 1997) However, modern anthropological study shows that the syncretic origin of religions is no longer in crisis of their existence. Thus, in the light of modern anthropological study, we may argue that the syncretic roots and essence of Caodaism are no longer a threat to the existence of Caodaism.

Flexibility and consolidation of Caodaism

Actually, flexibility and consolidation as the very nature of Caodaism helped it strive against all barriers and for success. A research conducted by Stark (1996) has examined that this is more or less the common feature of a new religion that retains cultural continuity with pre-existing traditions of the societies within which they seek converts. We can recognize this nature of religion as an important and universal social phenomenon. This assumption behind the claim makes it plain that the same nature of Caodaism has led it toward flexibility and consolidation in building an extraordinarily rich and complex relationship between Caodaism and especially *tam giao* traditions in a society of the South of Vietnam. As religious integration drove Caodaism to the way of flexibility and consolidation it made a regular attempt in incorporating indigenous as well as foreign elements into its own. Notably, the creed of Vietnamese native practices such as Spiritism particularly provided Caodaism with a strong ground. This is the socio-historical strength of Caodaism as it is found

with Roman Catholicism too. Due to syncretic and assimilative approaches of Caodaism, the Caodaists could successfully institutionalize their religion by overcoming all barriers. This gradual consolidation of Caodaism proves it as assimilative in nature that has become adjusted to cultural settings of the South of Vietnam with no troubles.

It is important to note that Caodaism constantly maintained links with religio-cultural elements of Chinese, Indian and Western origin. Due to this fact, Caodaism, with its harmonious synthesis of Eastern, Southeast Asian, Indian and Western elements specially from indigenous folk tales, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Christianity, appeared as the religion of an acclaimed small group in 1926. Therefore, Caodaism is found to have maintained its contacts with religions of Chinese, Indian and Western origin. In addition, a comparative study made by Dutton (1970) shows that religions of Indian origins deal with the issues of otherworldliness while the traditions of Chinese origin concern the issues of worldliness. As per his comparison and appraisal it appears that Caodaism integrated crucial points to harmonize the issues of otherworldliness with the worldliness. Regarding a specific root of Caodaism, historian Smith (1970) notes, “Caodaism finds its roots in the secret societies (hoi kin) inspired by the local settlements of the Chinese Heaven and Earth Association (Thien dia) that is the direct product of Chinese or Sino-Vietnamese religious sectarianism, called *Minh*. (pp. 335-49)

However, although Caodaism is firmly connected to diverse traditions, there is no dispute with regard to the matter that it developed independently in the matrix of pure Vietnamese culture. Consequently, although Caodaists borrowed many elements from diverse traditions and absorbed them in their

own tradition, they are always found to have communicated by using Vietnamese terminology and patterns of thinking. Thus, over the course of time the Caodaists completely reoriented a set of doctrines within the pure ideological sphere of Caodaism. Indeed, Caodaism, as an independent religion, developed gradually with new prospects of around five million people in and outside Vietnam.

Conclusion

In sum, assimilation in Vietnamese culture integrated diverse elements from various external resources through the acculturation process. Thus, in order to understand the rise and development of Caodaism as a native religion, a socio-historical study, specially, of the arrival of Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism and Christianity is called for. Christianity is not a strict monotheistic religion. Its doctrine of Trinity disrupted its strict monotheistic character. Regarding Taoism and Confucianism, as they are not missionary religions, they also could not spread over a wide area the way Buddhism could. Nevertheless, the assimilative approach of Vietnamese culture received these traditions and very successfully absorbed their elements. As Caodaism is a religion of Vietnamese origin it did not bother in receiving religio-cultural elements from Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and so on. Thus understood, Cao Dai religion developed as an official model of religion on the basis of a firm footing of syncretic elements. It diffused rapidly in its native cultural settings with the consolidation of its position in the society right after it achieved recognition legitimacy from the colonial government of Cochinchina in 1926. However, in addition to diverse elements, Caodaism absorbed more personal forms

of monotheism and polytheism to its harmonious synthesis. (Hoskins, 2008) Perhaps more importantly, these hybrid forms allowed Caodaists to overcome a sense of cultural inferiority by establishing cultural equality with the West and the East. This is a very likely reality because Caodaism has become a new panorama for its unique syncretistic approach which incorporated elements from all around it. This compromising stance of Cao Dai religion helps its adherents seek to draw connections with the world's faiths with a view to seeking harmonious relationships (Alam, 2020). More specifically, Caodaism can be viewed as a natural continuity of the Vietnamese tradition that concerns: 1) contributing deliberately toward disrupting negative racial, cultural, gender, class stereotypes; and 2) building trust with members of the mainstream or outside of the community of faith and practice. However, as the Western and Eastern traditions had been dominant streams to Caodaism, it was natural to have their impact upon the new religion. Therefore, we can deduce from established arguments that the themes dealt with in the syncretic doctrine of Caodaism are the new versions of the themes of the older ones.

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