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THE CHINESE RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES ON CAODAISM : A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Introduction

Throughout the history the people of Vietnam have been ruled and dominated by other nations and cultures. Over the last three thousand years Vietnam has been significantly influenced by China. Both China and France have tried to conquer not only the land but also the spirit of its people by attempting to impose their culture on the Vietnamese people. The Vietnamese people have not taken that has been imposed on them rather they have taken what suits with their culture and temperament. They have taken the best of other cultures and have combined them with their own culture and heritage. The best example of this kind can be seen in religious influences mixed in the Vietnamese culture. They have accepted the foreign religions and philosophies into their cultures because they have viewed them as natural and sensible additions to society. The ability of the Vietnamese people to take the elements from other cultures and

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religions and blend them with their own culture has led them to the formation of a new religion known as Caodaism. Caodaism is an indigenous Vietnamese religion originated in South Vietnam in 1926. Caodaists have assimilated elements from Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity, Hinduism and native Vietnamese spiritism (Smith, 1970: 350).

Caodaism is fundamentally and deliberately syncretic religion (Smith, 1970:573). They have attempted to bridge the gap between the East and the West based on religions and philosophies from both the Eastern and the Western cultures since it includes Buddha, Confucius, Lao-tzu and Christ as its pantheon. But the real basis of the syncretism is an attempt to bring together the three religions of the Sino-Vietnamese traditions, namely Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. Christianity has only a peripheral position except Christ as its pantheon, and nothing has been adopted from Christianity and Islam that would seriously clash with the underlying doctrinal tolerance of East Asian religions. The most important feature of Caodai syncretism is that of Taoist spirit-mediumship with a concept of salvation that was originally Buddhist. If any one of the three Sino-Vietnamese religions may be said to be the most dominant in Caodaism that is Taoism. Here I propose to analyze the significant elements of Chinese religions which have made great impact in the formation Caodaism.

The Chinese Religions and the Emergence of Caodaism

The Chinese started contacts with the Vietnamese as early as the 6th century B.C. (Fairbanks and Reischauer 1960:60). By 218 B.C. the Red River Delta was part of China when Shih Huang Ti was emperor of China, but China went through a

period of anarchy after the death of Huang Ti in 210 B.C. During that time, the Red River Delta and the coastal areas of Southeastern China became the Kingdom of Nam Viet (Hickey 1964:2). In 111 B.C. Nam Viet conquered the two Chinese provinces namely Kwantung and Kwangri, but the Chinese Emperor Wu Ti (141-87 B.C.) consolidated his empire and conquered the Nam Viet again. The fall of Nam Viet was the beginning of almost ten centuries Chinese domination over Vietnam, inculcating it with ideas and culture. But there is some dispute with regard to the actual amount of Chinese influence on Vietnam and its people. Some Vietnamese scholars claim that through many centuries of Chinese rule the Vietnamese managed to maintain a distinct and independent civilization (Oliver, 1976:20). During the ten centuries of Chinese domination there was a continuous exhibition of nationalistic movement by the Vietnamese. Despite the nationalistic fervor the long period of Chinese rule in Vietnam the society has been molded by Chinese cultural values, customs and religions. As Hickey states : “Numerous material benefits resulted from the Chinese dominated administration of this period. Roads and bridges were constructed to improve communications with China, extensive irrigation projects were undertaken in the delta, and harbors were improved. In addition, Chinese cultural influence increased and spread among the Vietnamese. The Chinese literary tradition provided a basis for the emerging Vietnamese literature and poetry.....Legal codes were modeled after those in China” (Hickey, 1964:4).

Although Vietnam achieved independence under a native dynasty from China in 939 A.D., the Mandarin emphasis on educational attainment, ritual performance, and governmental

control over the masses resulted in Chinese cultural influence being felt most deeply and being maintained for an extended period of time in religion, education and public administration (Thai, 1926:50). In 58 A.D. Confucianism was made the state cult in China. All the schools were ordered to institute a system of worship and reverence to Confucius before an ancestral altar. As a part of China Vietnam also felt the impact of Confucianism.

Taoism came in Vietnam about the same time as Confucianism. Thich Nhat Hanh writes “In Vietnam the essence of Laotzu’s and Tchong Tse’s philosophy is expressed only in the thought and conduct of educated persons of both the Buddhist and Confucian faith. There were no Taoist clergy as such in Vietnam. Among the ordinary people, there were a number of Taoist practitioners who knew little doctrine but made a living from their supposed magical powers.... they do not reflect the high spirit and thought of orthodox Taoism” (Hanh, 1967:13).

Buddhism was brought to Vietnam by the Chinese monks in the second century A.D. In the 3rd century A.D. many of the Indian Buddhist monks who were going to China *en route* Vietnam lived in Vietnam. By land and sea monks, merchants and travelers brought both Mahayana and Theravada to Vietnam. “Thien” sect of Mahayana Buddhism became the dominant sect during the course of time in Vietnam (Oliver, 1976:21). Orthodox Taoism was firmly established in China but in Vietnam Taoism was hardly distinguishable from the indigenous religious elements. Both Taoism and Buddhism did not establish in Vietnam as separate religion but they were synthesized with the indigenous religious beliefs of Vietnam.

Vietnamese indigenous beliefs included the cult of spirits, ancestral cult, the hero cult, animistic beliefs and an underlying core of animistic beliefs (Duncanson, 1968: 46).

In addition to these major religions, Vietnam was also open to the other Chinese popular religious movements, many of them were secretive. All these religions and movements played a vital role to the origin of Caodaism. Particularly, the religious movements of the first quarter of the 20th century namely; religious syncretism, anti-colonial expression, secret societies, the Minh organization and the emphasis on spiritism played an important role in its origin (Oliver, 1976:24). None of these aforementioned religions was exclusive, but they tended to be syncretic, adding and adapting their rituals and teaching to other religions. The Vietnamese found little difficulty accepting a synthesis of the religions with their indigenous religious beliefs, because religious amalgam was universal among the Vietnamese. Its contexts varied from place to place. The traditional syncretism had been enriched by the coming of Caodaism. The religious synthesis was common as early as the 13th century. It was primarily associated with “Three Teachings” namely Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. In 1247 Tran dynasty introduced the examinations in “Three Teachings”. The various modes of worship, which prevailed in Vietnam, were considered by the people are true. The “*Tam Giao*” Three Tradition weakened during 15th and 16th centuries due to the rise of orthodox Confucianism. But “Three Teaching” surfaced once again in 18th century. Confucian scholar Ngo Thi Si (1726-1793) argued that Buddhism and Confucianism differ by name, but their way was one. In the altar of Three Teachings, Confucius, Buddha and Lao-tzu were

worshipped. The rationale was to unite Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism under the aegis of the better teachings. However, “Three Teachings” did not inform about syncretism. It was rather a call for harmony or peaceful coexistence (Hickey, 1964:59).

Ngo Thi Nham, another prominent scholar, also endeavored to harmonize the “Three Teachings”. His thinking produced a slogan: “Great Way produces Three Teachings Way; Three Teaching Way unites in the Great Way”. By mid 19th century in line with popular syncretism it was believed that all those possessing merits are worth worshipping. Thich Nhat Hanh wrote about syncretism in Vietnamese religions: “A Vietnamese who profess to be a Confucian does not deny his belief in Buddhism, nor-must a convinced Buddhist declares that he disbelieves Confucianism. That is why we cannot say with accuracy how many Vietnamese are Buddhists. When we examine the beliefs of a typical peasant, we find elements of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism intimately mixed together, along with still other elements belonging to native beliefs that existed in Vietnam” (Hanh, 1967:12).

The Vietnamese are said to be dominated by a synthesis of the three great religions. Socially, the Vietnamese reactions are generally Confucian. From the religious point of view they are generally Buddhists and from the programmatic side, they are Taoist. It is generally unacceptable and foreign concept to the Vietnamese that one religion exclusively owns the “truth”. Dutton quotes a Vietnamese : “We do not believe that there is only one true and uniquely sanctifying belief. The creator has scattered the seeds of truth over the centuries and over the continents of the earth. Jesus or Buddha or Lao-tze, their

message is, at bottom only a form of the great divine truth. In their depths all religions come together (Dutton, 1970:24). A modern Vietnamese scholar argues that the Vietnamese have a unique religious tolerance and unique morality and this much-heralded tolerance is primarily associated with “Three Teachings” or *Tam Giao*. Moreover, Caodaism is seen as a new form of Esoteric teaching, or *Noi Dao*, which emerged during Tran dynasty period and has based on the Three Teachings (Blagov, 2001:1).

The “Three Religions” or “Three Teachings” have also provided the foundation on which several 20th century new religions in East and Southeast Asia were founded. These new religions have attempted to develop the theology and practice of the unification of religions in the context of a final revelation from the divine realm to the founders of these new religions. One of the new religions was Caodaism which was grounded in the Chinese “Three Religions” tradition (Lang, 2004:1). It also attempted to incorporate aspects of Christianity and European spiritualism during the period of contact and conflict with the French in Vietnam.

The Influence of Chinese Religions on Caodaism

The founders of Caodaism were familiar with the features of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, and with some sectarian groups which had tried or claimed to incorporate the best of the “Three Religions” (Lang, 2004:4). There were three groups who were the pioneers of founding Caodaism. Among them Ngo Minh Chieu (1878-1932), was considered to be the first adept of Caodaism. He came from a Mandarin’s family. His grandfather had served at the imperial court at Hue in high

Confucian tradition but his family fled the disturbances of that time and took refuge in the South. Ngo Van Chieu was born in February 28, 1878 in Cholon of South Vietnam. He was the only son of his family. In 1885 his parents moved to Hanoi to search for a job because of their poverty. At that time, Chieu stayed with his aunt at My-tho. His aunt got married with a Chinese herbalist who encouraged Chieu to examine the Chinese spiritism (Hartney, 2004:2). Chieu attended a French school in My-tho and College Chasseloup-Laubat in Saigon. In 1899, he qualified for entering into the administrative service of France Cochinchina. He held several positions in French administration in course of time including the district chief of Phu Quoc (Farid, 2010:13). His colleagues claimed that Chieu had been among those bureaucrats who declined to accept bribes. Although Chieu held various positions in administration, he was mild-mannered and polite.

Ngo Van Chieu was interested in religion and spiritism since his childhood. He was an ardent reader of the Asian classics and Western spiritism particularly French spiritist writer Flammarion since, 1902 (Oliver, 1976:33). It has been said that he also read the works of Alan Kardec, Leon Denis and the writings of the then President of Theosophical Society, Annie Besant. He also attended the séance arranged by the mediums of Taoist-Shamanistic tradition. In 1917, he was introduced with Doa Phat Duong sect that practiced spiritism. Between 1917 and 1919, Chieu participated in mediumistic séances at a temple at Cai Khe near Can Tho. His enthusiasm for spiritism increased as he sought help to cure his ailing mother. During these communications, he was put in contact with traditional Chinese deities including the great red-face

demon slayer Guan di Ging. At this time these spirits introduced him to an extremely authoritative voice who revealed himself through mystical name Cao Dai Thien Ong Dai Bo Tat Ma-Ha-Tat (Hartney, 2000:2). Later Chieu and some other people interested in spiritism began holding their own séances at Tan An separately. At Tan An in 1920, he first became acquainted with the spirit Cao Dai. In February 1920, Cao Dai first appeared in the séance. The spirit identified himself the same spirit who first appeared before him in earlier séances. At the same year he was transferred to Ha Thin and then to Phu Quoc. In Phu Quoc Chieu participated in many spirit séances and acquainted the same spirit. From that time the spirit Cao Dai dominated his life. Here we can see the strong influence of Taoist spiritism on Chieu.

The other two groups namely, *Pho Loan* and Le Van Trung were also French speaking administrative classes who also turned to spiritism. Pho Loan group was consisted of Pham Long Tac, Lao Quayah Cu and Coa Hoai Sang. This group had no knowledge of Chinese spiritism. They used European and American methods of spirit communication that was table-tipping. In August 1925, a spirit known as *AAA* (the first three letters of the Romanised Vietnamese alphabet) appeared himself in their séances. On December 15, 1925 *AAA* spirit revealed himself that his true name was Cao Dai, the Supreme Being (Blagov, 2001:21).

Le Van Trung (1879-1934) a close friend of Vuong Quan Ky, often attended the séances. He graduated from the college Chasseloup-Laubat and joined to the French colonial service. And resigning from the job, he started business. After some success, he became bankrupt and having been frustrated he had

shown his interest in mediumism and started to attain in séance. In séances meeting on January 18, 1926, Cao Dai revealed Himself to Trung (Farid, 2010:15).

So it became obvious to them that all the three groups were worshipping the same God. On January 7, 1926, the *Pho Loan* was asked by Cao Dai to meet with Le Van Trung and to start the séance all together. In the meeting Caodai instructed them to visit Ngo Ming Chieu. Following the instruction, Le Van Trung and *Pho Loan* group met Ngo Ming Chieu and they started séances. On January 27, 1926, they held their first séances under the direction of Chieu at his house. On February 12, 1926, the full name of new religion; the Great Way of the Third Salvation as well as the full name of the Supreme Being were revealed (Blagov, 2001:22). Thus, we see that all the three groups had some sorts of spiritism involvement either Chinese or Western and the Caodai leaders combined both these forms into their séance communications. It is obvious that Caodaism has been influenced by Chinese spiritism particularly Taoist spiritism.

Since the leaders of Caodaism were familiar with the existing of Vietnam, they incorporated a great deal of religious elements from those religions. The Caodaists' own incorporation of elements of these religions was eclectic and syncretic and made little attempt to produce a philosophical rationalization of the differences (Werner, 1981:8). It has been argued that although organizationally Caodaism marked a departure from the past Vietnamese practice, its ideology drew heavily from the "Three Teachings" tradition and beliefs widespread in Vietnamese society at large (Werner, 1980:8). The founders of Caodaism were also familiar with Catholicism

from their extensive experience with the French colonial regime and local Vietnamese Catholics. The theology which they developed through spirit writing reflects the influences of all these religions. We can see also some influence from French spiritualist writers such as Flammarion and Allan Kardec who were mentioned by Caodaists as among the earlier prophets and spirits (Lang, 2004:4).

Caodaists worship one Supreme God, the creator of the universe and all religions, the father of mankind. Cao Dai is the name given to the Supreme Being worshipped by Caodaists. The words “*Cao Dai*” mean “High Palace” where the Supreme Being dwells. The term Cao Dai is a Taoist term (Werner, 1981:57). In worshipping Cao Dai, Caodaism greatly simplifies the typical East Asian pantheon or multitude of deities by positing a supreme being who should be worshiped above all other gods and spirits. While Chinese and Vietnamese popular religious traditions include a high god—the Jade Emperor, Caodaism seems to have assimilated the Jade Emperor into the earliest versions of their supreme deity. In the first medium sessions in a message God identified Himself as Jade Emperor alias Cao Dai. Later Caodaism has omitted any reference to the Jade Emperor. The imagery of “holy father” is used by some contemporary Caodaists when discussing Caodai theology in English. In any case, the supreme deity and “father-figure” in Caodaism absorbed elements of both the “Jade Emperor” of Chinese popular religion and the Christian idea of God (Lang, 2004:8).

Caodaism also includes worship of a mother-goddess known as *Duc Phat Mau*, who represents the “*Yin*” aspect of creation as Cao Dai represents *Yang* forces. The role of the

“holy mother” in creation has various interpretations within Caodaism. The “*Yang*” principle, for most Caodai, is higher than the “*Yin*” principle but some Caodaists believe that “holy mother” represents the creative principle in the universal and produced all phenomena in space-time while the ‘*Yang*’ principle is somehow above of space-time. So the cosmology of Caodaism explains that the genesis of the universe is by interaction of *Yin-Yang* principles. Caodai spiritualism is also largely based on Taoist *Yin-Yang* symbolism (Oliver, 1976:54). So here we can see the strong influence of Chinese idea of Yang - Yin on Caodaism.

Caodaism also includes veneration of a pantheon of religious or ethical leaders who brought revelations from God to various cultures and initiated major religions, or prophets of different religions but most of them are definitely Chinese. These figures are honored in the Tay Ninh temples in an arrangement of statues reflecting their positions in the pantheon on the wall in front of the cathedral. In the center of the top row of this pantheon is the figure of Sakyamuni Buddha, Lao Tzu on the left and Confucius on the right. They represent Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism (Lang, 2004:9).

On the next level in the center under Sakyamuni is Li Thai Bach (the Vietnamese name for the Chinese Tang dynasty poet Li Po), flanked by the Chinese Buddhist deity Guan Yin on the left, and the Chinese deity Guan Gong on the right, Gong is popular for his fierce devotion to duty. He protects business. Guan Yin, the female Chinese version of an Indian Buddhist deity, is worshipped by women and has a reputation for mercy and compassion. Li Thai Bach, who was a Chinese poet during the 9th century A.D., appeared in the early séances held by the

founders of Caodaism authorizing new religions. He finally took up the position of the spiritual “Pope”. Jesus Christ appears in the next row, under the figure of Li Thai Bach accompanied by no one. Jesus is considered to be divine figure sent by Cao Dai to try to save the humanity. They also occasionally incorporated elements of peasant folk religion including the local village deities in Caodaism. Thus the Caodai pantheon seems to show the influence of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Chinese and Vietnamese popular religion and Chinese cultural history (Lang, 2004:12).

Caodaism has been documented as a syncretism of the Vietnamese Three Religion system, which stressed amalgamation and merger of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. The three religions were believed to be three branches growing a common stem, which has existed from pre-historic times (Groot, 1912:3). The colors of Caodai religious banner—golden, blue and red are viewed as a symbol of the unity of the Three Religions. The banner involves symbolic association between Confucianism and red, Buddhism and yellow, Taoism and blue. However, researchers have argued that doctrinally and in religious practice, Caodaism can be characterized as mainly Taoist in nature. Followers of Esoteric School of Caodaism believe that the way existed before the universe, and it was ruled by Lao Tzu. According to Chieu Minh sect, Taoism and ancestral wisdom could be fully understood only by the people of the superior intellect, and not by the ordinary layman. Some contemporary observers also believe that Caodaism is in fact Taoism in disguise because its mediumistic practices allegedly borrow from Taoist cult (Duncanson, 1968:49). Taoism has also made strong influence on the Esoteric School

of Caodaism than on Exoteric School. The Doctrine of Silence and Inactive is the basis for the Esoteric School. Asceticism is practiced to a greater extent. Asceticism as practiced by the members of the Esoteric School consists of permanent vegetarianism and the restraint of human passion in the practice of daily contemplation. Simplicity of life and meditation on the *Dao* are encouraged (Dutton, 1970:16).

Caodaism has been very much influenced by Buddhism. Even sometimes Caodaism is called “Reformed Buddhism” (Smith, 1970:350). Indeed, Caodaism can be seen partly as an attempt to revitalize Buddhism (Werner, 1981:13). Many of the Buddhist monks and Taoist priests joined Caodaism when it was founded. Even the Buddhist pagoda was used for the inauguration ceremony of Caodaism. They continued to use the pagodas before their own temples were built and some of the Buddhist monks who were the chiefs of those pagodas embraced to Caodaism.

The Buddhist concept of *Samsara*, the wheel of birth and death, and the law of karma and the *pancha sila* are accepted by Caodaists. Men’s suffering in the world is seen to be a consequence of his karma. The path of escape from this suffering is the life of discipline and meditation. The goal of Caodaists is to attain nirvana. The Caodaists see nirvana as man’s realization that his soul is one with the Universe or Cao Dai. The Exoteric and Esoteric Schools of Caodaism have been compared with the Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism (Dutton, 1970:16).

Caodaism can also be seen as a continuity of the Vietnamese Confucian tradition. Caodai code of conduct is

much influenced by Confucianism. Caodaists are asked to perform their duties towards society by fulfilling their role within the family, the village, the nation and the larger extended family, the world. Caodaists accept the three fundamental relationships of Confucius: ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife. Caodaists reaffirmed the Confucian doctrine of filial piety, hierarchical authority and ethico-social behavior as stated in a Caodai brochure: “The king receives a mandate from Heaven to govern his subjects. So, who in the country is above the king? The duty of the subject is to be absolutely faithful to the king. To be faithful to the king is to love the country.....Above men are three beings to whom he owes equal respect; the king, the teacher, and the father” (Werner, 1981:22). The Five Cardinal Virtues : benevolence, righteousness, propriety, knowledge and sincerity are also accepted as guidelines for individual behavior. Women are to achieve four virtues : proper employment, proper demeanor, proper speech, and proper behavior. Though Caodaism views the people of the world as brothers and sisters, according to Caodaism the mankind can also be divided into Confucian categories of nobleman, which follow the principles of humanity, righteousness and non-exertion and smaller ones, those who seek fame and personal profit (Berling, 1980:36).

To the Caodaists, Caodaism is the beginning of the third and final cycle in history, that of renovation, the first cycle having been that of the creation and second cycle a period of destruction. The Vietnamese name for Caodaism follows this millenarian conception: *Dai Dai Tane Ky Pho Do* or Third Great Way of salvation. Thus the third period is the final cycle

of renovation which will be ushered in by the advent of Caodaism. The Cao Dai incorporation of this tri-cyclical millenarianism follows a generalized millenarian conception found in both Buddhism and Taoism (Werner, 1981:7).

Caodaism believes that human soul is immortal. Physical death is not an end, but only a continuation of life, physical body may be dead but the soul lives to be incarnated or to be reunited with the Supreme Being. Human sufferings are explained in terms of soul’s impurity therefore the sufferings are caused by the human element, and not by the Supreme Being. The human suffering and injustice in the world have been explained in the Buddhist terms of Law of Karma. Men can get rid of the suffering and the cycle of refirth and be reunited with Cao Dai that is Nirvana if they follow Caodai doctrine. Caodaists say that Nirvana does not mean extinction, but the formless, immortal life of the spirits (Blagov, 2001:31). Thus the Buddhist Law of Karma and the doctrine of Nirvana is have been amulgated in Caodaism.

The Vietnamese practice of spiritism included several categories of supernatural beings, all of which were taken over by Caodaism. The occult powers of mediums and sorcerers, magic and divination and exorcism were valued for communication with the spirits. The spirits or genies were appealed to by invocation, called *cau-tien* séances. Caodaists used séances practices extensively to communicate with the spirits. Many of the founders of the religion had practiced *cau-tien* or were mediums. Many of them had learned how to practice *cau-tien* in the traditional Vietnamese manner as members of Taoist (*tutien*) spiritist groups. Early founders were

members of (*tu-tien*) sects called Minh sects. In fact, Ngo Van Chieu, the founder of Caodaism, had spent over twenty years participating Taoist meditation and spirit invocation in the *cau-tien* used by the Minh sects. The people who were responsible for establishing the rites, prayers and ceremonial music of Caodaism were from the Minh sects (Werner, 1981:8).

We can assume how the Chinese religions contributed to the formation of Caodaism quoting words from Werner : “Doctrinally and in religious practice, Caodaism can be characterized as mainly Taoistic in nature. Its pantheon was Taoist in conception, although a number of European figures were also worshipped as deities. The main deity was Cao Dai which was a Sino-Vietnamese divinity concept meaning the ‘high tower’. Cao Dai and the other spirits in the cult revealed the truths and rituals of the religion through séances, interpreted that it sought to combine the three Eastern religions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism and thereby restore harmony to a troubled world and revive moral rectitude in the face of declining public ethics. From Buddhism, Caodaism adopted the Three Submissions, the Five Interdictions, the beliefs in Karma, reincarnation and Nirvana, the practices of asceticism, devotions, meditation, vegetarianism, religious purity and charity for the poor. From Taoism, Caodaism borrowed the Three Jewels (matter, spirit, soul) and the ‘Union of the Five Elements’. Taoist themes included the belief in spirits, magic, the intervention of the spirits to promulgate and reaffirm religious laws. Confucian themes in Caodaism defined social relationships and behavior emphasizing correct comportment, the ranking of social relationship, the belief in

the necessity of proper relations between superiors and inferiors, a rejection of egalitarianism, a preoccupation with rites, an attachment to community, scholarship, knowledge, and tradition. Incorporated from Confucianism were also the Three Duties: duty of subject to king, child to father, wife to husband and the Five Cardinal Virtues” (Werner, 1981:6).

The historical, cultural and religious antecedents are important to understand the Caodai ideology and its link with the past. There are certain factors related to the origin of Caodaism. Ideology is an important factor in the rise of Caodaism. Caodaism skillfully synthesized the existing religions and value systems in Vietnam. “Three Religions” namely Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism have greatly contributed to this synthesis which can be understood by the aforementioned discussion. Even the Caodaists themselves believe that their religion is syncretic and the goal of Caodaism is to unite the religions of the past and the humanity through an effective synthesis. Vietnam’s rich cultural heritage helps them to establish the goal. Vietnam has been in contact with other religions and cultures, especially the Chinese, the Indian and the French. Vietnam itself is a synthesis of races, religions and cultures. The most enduring influence has been that of the Chinese, but the Indian and the Western thought have also left their mark on Vietnam.

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