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## A Religious Vision of the Nation and Its Pantheon: Caodaist Perspectives on Decolonizing French Indochina

This paper examines French Indochina from the perspective of Caodaist writers, historians and theologians who have described the birth of their new faith in 1926 and its struggle to survive as the “national religion” (quoc giao) in a “nation” which did not yet exist. Differing from the perspectives of French, American and English writers, who have tended to emphasize the political ambitions of some Caodaist leaders while denigrating their religious sincerity, Caodaist writers describe how the early history of the faith was both inspired and guided by spirit messages. They also emphasize the importance of the March 1945 coup in Saigon, in which Caodai militia assisted the Japanese in overthrowing the French, and proclaimed an end to the colonial era five months before Ho Chi Minh’s proclamation in Hanoi.

The existence of an armed militia to protect the Tay Ninh branch of Caodaism is controversial among Caodaists, and it is clear that although they shared a religious vision, Caodaists were never the united “third force” that some people believed (or wished) that they should be. While Tay Ninh leaders were returned from exile because they agreed to collaborate briefly with the French government, some religious leaders in the Mekong Delta joined forces with Viet Minh until 1954, and there were many different interpretations of the ways in which religion and politics could or should be combined.

This paper draws on oral history interviews with Caodai leaders now in the United States and France, two summers of ethnographic research in Vietnam, and histories and biographies written by Caodaist authors providing their own perspective on the conflict-ridden de-colonizing process and its significance for the future of their faith.

As a religious and social movement with two to four million members in the period from 1930-1950, Caodaism was one of the most significant “alternative voices” during the colonial period. While a number of distinguished scholars have documented aspects of Caodaist history in the 1970s (Ralph Smith, Victor Oliver, Jayne Werner), the fact that the religion was virtually closed down in Vietnam until 1995 has meant that little attention has been paid to it for the last few decades. My interest in this new religion was sparked by visiting Caodai temples in southern California and meeting Caodaist writers like Do Van Ly (who served as the Republic of Vietnam’s ambassador to the US in 1963, and published a new “spiritual manifesto” for the overseas community in 1989) and Hum Dac Bui (who has translated Caodai scriptures into English, and written a book on Caodai theology for a non-Vietnamese public). They were very critical of western writers who described Caodaism as a “peasant political

movement” and argued that its teachings and spirit messages have been almost totally neglected by commentators who have seen only its political positions. In the past year, the prominent Caodai historian Dong Tan has published a new volume about prominent Caodaists from his new home in Australia, and the Caodai Teaching Institute (Co Quan Pho Thong Giao Ly Dai Dao) in Ho Chi Minh City has also presented a new interpretation of the Inauguration of the Faith (Khai Dao).

These Vietnamese sources permit a re-assessment of earlier research, particularly since those writing from the diaspora do so now with a new candor about doctrinal differences and political allegiances that could not be discussed earlier. Some write from the vantage point of long distance nationalism, others try to accentuate the universal appeal of what has always declared itself to be a global faith offering salvation for all races and all cultures. An assessment of these recent works, against the background of research visits to the sacred homeland of Caodaism in Saigon, the Mekong Delta, Tay Ninh and Danang, should allow us to understand the particular features of the “spiritual nationalism” which Caodaists proposed as an alternative to “two materialisms” ---both the Marxist-Leninist materialism of the communist party and the rationalist consumer materialism of Euro-American values.