

Open Temple, Open Eyes: Viewing Caodaism

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On the 18th of November 2000, in Wiley Park, a suburb in Sydney's west, Danna Vale MHR, representing both the Federal Minister for Ethnic Affairs and the Prime Minister, opened the first purpose-built temple to *Duc Cao Dai* outside of Asia. Mr Nguyen Chanh Giao, Australia's leading Caodaist and head of the Sydney community, declared the temple to be a gift to all Australians. It is a remarkable advantage to the academy that such a concrete example of Vietnam's largest indigenous faith now exists in this city, adding to what is almost a complete working model of the religious traditions of the world scattered amongst the various suburbs, but what is the student of religion to make of such a gift? What I would like to do in this article, is ruminate upon an even more preliminary step, a methodological one: how do we address the presence of a faith that is, in various dimensions, radically different from the general academic understanding of the religious life of this country? Moreover, how can we learn from previous attempts to address not only like religions, but also the way communities have found themselves places amongst us? Finally, how can one speak of Caodaism outside of its original area of influence (for even this dimension of the faith has yet to be addressed)? Until 1975 *Dao Cao Dai* (often known as Caodaism), was an almost wholly Asian phenomenon. Although it had spread to Cambodia, Japan, and even Africa, its activity elsewhere was minimal. This has now changed completely. The current religiously repressive atmosphere in Vietnam has encouraged many Caodaists to join the exodus out of Vietnam. The resulting scattered patterns of settlement by Vietnamese refugees in areas such as North America and Europe combined with the tendency for a strong concentration of migrants in Sydney has resulted in the Caodaist community in this city becoming one of the most active Caodaist communities in the world. This temple *could* therefore be understood as a bold statement of Australian religious and cultural activity but how can it be considered in this light? This paper provides an exceptionally brief introduction to Caodaism followed by a concise consideration of the ways this faith can be approached by the Australian academy. I shall stress that the Caodaist temple of Wiley Park is a challenge to the academy to understand what is now quite clearly an Australian phenomenon, but one quite unlike those traditions which our discipline has traditionally focused.

Caodaism commenced in 1926 and declares itself to be a Great Way (Dai Dao) – a religion granted to bring the faiths of the world together. The prime movers of the new religion were almost exclusively members of the French-educated administrative classes of Cochinchina (the directly administered French possession of Southern Vietnam). The bipolarity of French education and Sino-

Vietnamese tradition of this class was reflected in the development of the new faith that so many of them joined. Hierarchically, Caodaism reflects the structure of the Catholic church and Jesus of Nazareth makes an appearance in a diverse canon of saints and immortals that also includes the national heroes of Vietnam; great figures of French culture, such as Victor Hugo; and significant figures of Chinese history and mythology from the warrior god Guan Di Gong to Sun Yat Sen the founder of the first Chinese republic. The spiritual focus of Caodaism, in fact the machine that legitimates both its syncretic tendencies and its wide canon, is group *séance*. Members of the college of mediums or *Hiep Thien Dai* (one of three governing hierarchies) carry out ritualised *séances*. Many writing devices are used, but the most famous is called the *corbeille à bec*.¹ It is basket held by several ritual servants connected to a long arm and a pointer. During the *séance* the pointer traces out words that are taken down by scribes. The mystical writing that issues forth from the divine pointer delivers instructions from heaven. These messages are often sent in near-perfect poetic metre from the religion's spiritual pope the Tang Dynasty poet Li Po or in charming *alexandrines* by Hugo. *Séance* in *Dao Cao Dai* may at first glance seem a legacy of Western spiritism and to an extent this is true, but the most extensive influence has been from spirit-invoking popular religious movements afoot in China and Vietnam for more than 300 years before the religion's advent. French Masonry and anti-Qing Dynasty (i.e. Manchu) groups named *Minh* were also influential in its rise. The messages received also introduce a strong current of monotheism linked to the encouragement of a mystical syncretic union of the three main traditions of China/Vietnam: the Ru tradition, Daoism and Buddhism,² some non-Christian traditions of the West are also mentioned including, Judaism, Islam, Egyptian mythology and Platonism but these traditions are far from the main focus during ritual. The several holy books of the faith were either conducted or legitimised using *séance* procedures. On a more cultural and political level, *Dao Cao Dai* emphasised the integration of East and West as represented by the 'two favoured nations of God,'³ Vietnam and France. Caodaist music and worship creates a ritual that is both an offering of sincere respect in the Ru manner and a Daoist-like regeneration of spiritual force (*qi*). Worshippers concentrate their gaze on a single eye mounted above every altar dedicated to *Duc Cao Dai*. This name of the Supreme Being translates as 'venerable high tower' and is a mystical pseudonym for the Divine.

Using conservative estimates, we can say that in the first four years of the religion's existence it attracted around 500 000 followers and by the 1940s two million (Oliver, 1971: 44). Throughout World War II, the faith developed its own army under the aegis of the Japanese occupational forces. In the 1950s, many of the religion's hierarchy were appointed to positions in the various cabinets of the Emperor *Bao Dai*. At this stage, Caodaism was well on the way to becoming the prime social force in the non-communist south. During the early 1960s, *Ngo Dinh Diem*, following the advice of American operatives, used enormous sums of foreign aid to pay for the dismantling of the military arm of the faith. After 1975, the communists directed a great deal of energy to dismantling the religion itself. Current estimates of the numbers of Caodaists vary between four to six million. If the later figure can be believed, then Caodaism is at least as popular as the Bahá'í

Faith and, despite its adverse recent history, these figures place Caodaism as one of the more significant small religions of the world. These figures also suggest that *Dao Cao Dai* must rank as one of the most successful religious movements since the rise of Islam. The tragic dispersion of the Vietnamese peoples after 1975 has brought *Dao Cao Dai* to our shores where it is beginning to thrive - its temple in Wiley Park is the religion's most obvious international manifestation. However, if any of the people who daily drive past this temple have previously read or heard anything about *Dao Cao Dai*, chances are their knowledge would be derived from either a personal interest in the calamities of the US-Vietnam war, or by travelling to, or reading about someone's travels in Vietnam. Few of these sources would prove useful in developing a reasonable, much less a comprehensive, understanding of this faith. In fact, except for a tiny amount of well-considered research (Smith, 1970; Oliver, 1973; Blagov, 2001), it is quite fair to say that the Western eye has failed abysmally to view this religion as a legitimate and important religion.

Tin Do Cao Dai (i.e. 'Cao daists') and their faith are often treated as alien and inhuman manifestation as a cursory survey of textual responses to Caodaism show. Bernard Newman in his 1953 *Report on Indochina* says of the main temple of Caodaism, "The designers of the Festival of Britain would love it: so would Walt Disney." (1953: 66). This reference to cartoon animation leads on to perhaps the most famous reference to *Dao Cao Dai* made by Graham Greene in his novel *The Quiet American*. In it he refers to the Great Divine Temple as "...a Walt Disney fantasia of the East, dragons and snakes in technicolour..." (Greene, 1955: 103) This cartoon reference to colour, albeit in a work of fiction, has stuck in the minds of more popular writers. When Denis Warner, a war journalist, briefly sums up the faith he suggests that the "Cao Dai (sic⁴, have their temple of dragons and purple plaster, and get messages by *planchette* from Victor Hugo..." (Warner, 1964, 26). Again, the emphasis is on colour but also, in this case, *séance* (a Western phenomenon). These are the only features Warner finds worthy of mentioning. Ann and Walter Unger, composers of an extensive photographic essay of Vietnamese Temples, believe that the Holy See of *Dao Cao Dai* (on which the Wiley Park temple is carefully based):

...is a cathedral in Tay Ninh, northwest of Saigon, whose gaudily [*kitschig-buntes*] coloured decorations are as exaggerated [*überladen*] as its synthesis of philosophies (1997: 45).

Their book catalogues a vast range of Vietnamese temples most of which are highly colourful. Their term *kitschig-buntes*, rendered as 'gaudy' in the English edition, could be more clearly translated as 'colourful/mixed-trashy.' If one were inclined to uphold a particular aesthetic, one might apply such a term to all the temples in the book, even if they fail to outdo the colourful and almost *überladen* religious installations of the Western religious sphere such as the restored and (for some almost embarrassingly) brilliant Sistine Chapel in Rome.⁵ Nevertheless the Ungers single out the temples of *Dao Cao Dai* for this derogatory label. In Wiley Park a Cao Dai temple can seem exotic, but in the pages of a book on Vietnamese temples - where one photograph is of the body of an embalmed Buddhist monk nailed onto an altar and covered in a glass case - Caodaism seems very much a part

of the stylistic *milieu*. Their description of *Dekor* suggests that parts of the temple have been added after building and are merely for show, colour and performance - the transient scenery of a stage. A little scholarship would reveal that in fact, the *Dekor of Dao Cao Dai* architecture is an integral part of the building, the very *raison d'être* of its space as sacred space.

As time wears on, it is unfortunate that Westerners, in particular Australians, continue to remain prisoners of Greene's *bon mot*. Of a number of examples that could be provided (writers on the world wide web are particularly insensitive), I concentrate on two press sources. In a 1993 article for *Geo* magazine travel-writer Sarah Gorman cries, "Divine, Devout and a touch of Disney." Gorman's depiction of the Holy See is both incorrect and demeaning,

The temple itself is a Disneyesque expression of the sect's childlike borrowings from the world's religious experience. Bleeding heart statues of the sacrificed Christ, long Confucian beards, flabby, smiling Buddhas and vast pillars swathed in a confection of dragons all conspire to convince the unsuspecting visitor that he has stumbled upon a museum of religious waxworks. (1993: 46).

According to Gorman the visitor is repeatedly 'unsuspecting' and the *Tin Do Cao Dai* are 'unquestioning' among themselves but 'determined' when approaching visitors. Gorman tries to suggest that amidst such a strange environment some sinister script for the visitor's soul is being enacted, "...tourists are too much in awe of the sheer pomp of the whole building to notice [the guides'] zealous tones, too fascinated by the experience to be suspicious of the proselytising welcome." (1993: 42). Here we see Gorman trying to establish a connection between the perceived strangeness of the place and the supposedly unthinking, yet deliberate, roles assumed by the followers.⁶

Most recently, David Atkins in his feature on *Dao Cao Dai* for the *Qantas* in-flight magazine, writes of, "...a bustle of tour parties, which greet the cult of Cao Dai with bemused looks. Venturing inside the Cao Dai temple reveals an explosion of psychedelic colours. Saccharine pink clashes brazenly with tiffany blue." (1999: 82). Of course there is no *actual* clash when each colour in the temple has a different theological/mystical meaning, the 'clash' resides purely in the Western eye. As for the performance of ritual, says Atkins, *Tin Do Cao Dai* dress 'identically' (they do not) and file 'robotically' into position. Here we have another Westerner trying to challenge the individuality as well as the humanity of those of this faith. To reinforce the notion that the Western eye is unable to break free from such restraints, Atkins quotes in full Greene's *cliché* that we noted above.

I provide these examples, though they come from popular journals, to illustrate how these authors persist in highlighting *only* the strangeness of *Dao Cao Dai*. They are not interested in a balanced view. There is an obsession with colourfulness and the common theme seems to be cartoon animation, as well as the fake and *dekorated* performance of the building. It is as though Caodaist architecture is simply too *überladen* for these and many other commentators to take seriously. Gorman and Aitken imply that the followers merely reflect the building as strange and insincere beings; less than real and less than adult.

Therefore it rings true that Western Eye can be easily corrupted by a process which Nietzsche described as a construction of meaning which commands a "...mobile army of metaphors... embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical." (1954: 46-7). They become "truths" but, as Nietzsche adds, "...truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are." (1954: 47). We can see this happening with the Greene quotation as it becomes more canonical. Edward Said has suggested such structures dictate the way the West views the East, through the prism of "Orientalism." A system of,

truths in Nietzsche's sense of the word [where it is] correct that every European, in what he could say about the Orient, [is] consequently a racist, and imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric. (1991: 204).

Said is commenting upon that grand tradition where Westerners appropriate the Orient (the culturally other, the 'there') through particular descriptions that are intertwined with political and societal assumptions. These descriptions, whether textual or verbal, place the 'Orient' in a position of lesser value to what is Occident or Western (or 'here'). Worse still, what appears to upset writers like the Ungers is not the total otherness of *Dao Cao Dai* architecture, but its appropriation of familiar Western imagery within the syncretic mix. This is the only significant difference between the images of *Dao Cao Dai* architecture and other Vietnamese architecture in their book. East and West *can* be mixed; when it is done on Western terms - *Madama Butterfly* and *Turandot* make charming operas. It is when we confront the mixing of Eastern and Western ideals on Eastern terms that the power structure of the cultural hierarchy identified by Said is confused. It is *disorienting*. In making this challenge, *Dao Cao Dai* rends the Western eye. To ameliorate this discomfort, the above writers attempt to emphasise *Dao Cao Dai's* strangeness and so devalue its importance in the face of the supposedly 'normal' Western experience of faith. It follows that they would want to depict *Dao Cao Dai* as 'Disneyesque,' that is, ultimately a 'Mickey Mouse'⁷ faith. It is a trap I hope future commentators on Caodaism will avoid.

Let us return again to the academy and how it has approached *Dao Cao Dai*. For a start few Western academics have been drawn to examine it. As Blagov says, "Caodaism is among the least studied phenomena in the modern religious history of South-East Asia." (Blagov, 2001: x). Gabriel Gobron is the first Westerner to take the faith seriously. His writings are the absolute opposite of what we have seen in the above quotes. His work of 1950, *Histoire et Philosophie du Caodaïsme* is an emanation of years spent in spiritualist circles in France as well as number of encounters with *Tran Quang Vinh* an early *Dao Cao Dai* dignitary. Gobron's work is laudatory and celebratory. His general narrative is built around a core of travellers' accounts of the new faith; he never went to Vietnam himself. Around these accounts, Gobron includes official descriptions of doctrine topped with additional rapturous paeans to the new faith. Writing a few years after, Fall describes Gobron as "... a now deceased French adherent of the faith, whose books on the subject have the approval of the highest Cao-Dai authorities." (1955: 237). Gobron's book remains a clear indication of how early adepts of the faith *wanted* Caodaism to be depicted to the West.

It is with Fall however that we meet a theme that haunts Western scholarship on *Dao Cao Dai*. Fall is more interested in the politics of Vietnam in the 1950s than he is with its religious life; he treats the latter with circumspection. His 1955 article, 'The Political-Religious Sects of Vietnam' opens with reference to *le goût du merveilleux* that, he unfairly suggests, is a particular characteristic of the Vietnamese. His words continue in this vein, suggesting that faith was little more than a will to establish a "...semi-religious fief." (1955: 235). He restricts his understandings to French sources and conversations with *Pham Cong Tac*, head of the faith at the time.

Fifteen years on and Smith in his 1970 articles for the *Journal of the School for Oriental and African Studies* sets the standard of the documentation, if not the interpretation, of Caodaism. He gives a brief but comprehensive introduction to the faith but is not impressed with Fall's methodology. After deriding the ever-present Graham Greene quote we noted earlier, Smith adds,

...this superficial notion of the religious elements in Caodaism fitted in very well with the cynicism of political observers, notably Bernard Fall, who saw in Caodaism no more than a political movement anxious to preserve its private armies and local power, using its religious ideas merely to dupe a credulous peasantry (1970: 335).

Smith refuses to write from this viewpoint nor does he turn rhapsodic. This attitude and a wide reading of Vietnamese sources provides the clarity of Smith's work. Given his benchmark of clarity and utility, it is unfortunate that some who come after him repeat Fall's mistake.

Two other major English language works should be noted. Victor Oliver's book of 1973 *Cao Dai Spiritism* is drawn from his doctoral thesis. This work is a collection of conversations in French of many dignitaries of both the *Tay Ninh* sect and other major divisions of Caodaism. His work recording the history of the subdivisions of the faith are very important. One might say overall that Oliver's work lacks a strong methodological background being more a collection of comments about the faith, rather than a systematic appraisal of the religious nature of Caodaism. Nevertheless, Oliver's book is extremely accessible, especially in terms of identifying aspects of doctrine, ritual and, less comprehensively, theology, history and origins.

Sergei Blagov's work, *Caodaism: Vietnamese Traditionalism and its Leap into Modernity* is an English rendition of his thesis on Caodaism submitted to the University of Moscow. Blagov proves himself unrelenting in his pursuit of sources, verbal, textual and archival. Quite cleverly, he turns the academic prism of Orientalism on its head by suggesting that,

Adepts prided themselves on their sophistication and their receptivity to modern ideas, but they were also very anxious to find within their own culture some spiritual equivalence with the West. The establishing of the True Teaching for the Vietnamese people was believed to be an important achievement. It was a sort of Asian "Occidentalism", one of its deepest images of the Other (2001: xii).

Blagov remains sensitive to the machinations and thoughts of Caodaist dignitaries because he is analysing the texts they and their compatriots were writing at the time, whether in French or Vietnamese, Methodologically, Blagov pushes a tenderer form of sociology than that found in Werner (see below). One might rather equate his style with an easy-reading journalistic method recording the twists and turns of Caodaism over the last several decades.

Beyond these historically based recordings there is one significant commentary on Caodaism that takes a more sociological and interpretive approach, this is Jayne Susan Werner's *Peasant Politics and Religious Sectarianism: Peasant and Priest in the Cao Dai in Viet Nam* (published in 1981 from a doctoral thesis of 1976). It is a brave attempt but one which illustrates, for any writer on *Dao Cao Dai*, the pitfalls of such purely sociological interpretive approaches.

Werner's principal question is; what were social conditions that led to Caodaism's phenomenal growth? Her answer shows that she follows in the tradition of Fall rendering the religious dimensions of Caodaism insignificant.⁸ She considers that '...peasants joined the Cao Dai for political and socio-economic reasons' (1981: 56-57), and '...to be sheltered by a protective elite' (1981: 57). In her opinion, those who joined saw the religion as a '...kind of cultural nationalism,' (1981: 57) that was a '...reaction to Westernisation,' (1981: 62) as well as a '...form of escapism' (1981: 62). Of course, no adept of this or any religion would suggest that they committed his or her life to a faith for the sake of 'escapism.' What Werner tries to show is the 'scientific reality' that reveals the true nature of the Way of Cao Dai. In coming to these conclusions she situates this faith in a similar, if more subtle way, to those more popular authors we noted above.

Werner sticks to the assumption that society is where the 'truth' (in Nietzsche's sense of the word) that 'religion is totally divorced from the political' can be more easily maintained, that is, the West. What has trapped Werner is the very thing that can trap all of us; pre-existing modes of classification into which a phenomenon such as *Dao Cao Dai* is forced to fit. The reality is, Caodaism offers something new and, like a number of new religious phenomena, remains outside many normative experiences of what many take to be religious. This problem with terminology is amply illustrated by the way academics have struggled to name *Dao Cao Dai*. Werner says it is 'mostly Taoist' (1981, 6). Oliver uses the term 'Caodai Spiritism' (1973, *passim*) and Gobron refers to the religion as '*Buddhism renové*' (1949, title page).⁹ None of these terms are completely appropriate. In his novel *Der Glasperlenspiel* Hermann Hesse writes of a game of glass beads that are shifted in relation to each other with minute care and only after extensive deliberation. Hesse's biographer writes, 'The nearest analogy is chess, but figures and moves are given various complex meanings [...] which ultimately amount to a *lingua franca* that encompasses all human knowledge' (Freedman, 1981: 349). Hesse's game serves as a telling metaphor for the academy, particularly a discipline like studies in religion; classification and re-classification by the shifting of 'glass beads.' Caodaism presents a worldview where the divisions between 'art' and

'divine,' between 'national hero' and 'god' and most importantly, between the 'political' and the 'religious' are often sublimely blurred. Definitions are shifted and reshifted, arguments put and neologisms coined, all in order to classify but is classification understanding? For Werner, the Western concept of 'political' has been unsatisfactorily laid over her understanding of Caodaism, to the exclusion of the 'religious.' Similarly, to describe Caodaism as simply religious is to deny the fact that at times this faith was one of the most influential political and military forces in Vietnam. Blagov says of this,

Such movements [as *Dao Cao Dai*] inhabit that frontier area where the amalgamation of religious and political factors takes place... [For] millenarian movements inhabit the border area where the religious and the political fuse and interpenetrate, [and] methods of pure *religionwissenschaft* sometimes seem inadequate (2000: 1).

On this point alone, the academy should be extremely eager to search out ways *Dao Cao Dai* challenges present conceptualisations of such terms as 'religion.' Dwelling on the border areas between standard Nietzschean 'truths' can turn classification into a word game where the unease of the language cankers and we find terms bandaged upon terms. Blagov continues,

...the field of millenarian activity has proven unusually resistant to the efforts of social scientists. There has been no end of typologies and neologisms in this area: millenarian, chiliastic, millennial, nativistic, transformative, messianic, revitalizationist.... (2000: 1)

He recommends a way out when dealing with phenomena such as *Dao Cao Dai* - an interdisciplinary approach. Nothing could be more sensible. Each field of study in a university relies on its own number of methodologies - series upon series of habitual glass bead movements used to address certain phenomena. *Dao Cao Dai*, through its cultural and religious 'syncretism' and its religico-political nature, spills over the definitions we set upon the words we use to describe religion. Methodologically, we should approach *Dao Cao Dai* in a similar way. Perched between academic methods of approaching this subject, one has a chance to see where gaps exist in the ways that differing disciplines move their methodological 'glass beads.' Therefore, if we shift our point of observation by shifting methodological perspective, we can highlight the gaps in the varying approaches and also perhaps catch ourselves looking. Moreover, the scholar of *Dao Cao Dai* should try to suit various methodologies to the material, rather than forcing the material to suit a single approach. The following analogy, written appropriately on the matter of East-West understanding, makes this clearer,

An axe is a useful tool in relation to wood. It will not enable one to shave, but that is merely the limitation of the axe. It does not prove that hair does not exist or that it cannot be dealt with by another instrument. If a person limits oneself to the axe as one's only instrument... it is a decision about what one will do, not about the nature of things as such. Scholars who limit themselves to a preconceived method of studying reality do not

thereby determine the nature of reality. They are only limiting their own exposure to reality. (O'Hyun Park, 1996: 4.)

It is the very openness to methodological approaches – an openness that the discipline of studies in religion sometimes considers its bane – that our discipline is, in the case of new religious phenomena, most ably suited to studying. Beyond the anthropological and the sociological, as Werner shows, we must keep ourselves from the assumption that

... the world is an asylum of fools and traitors, of pretenders, guilty consciences, and half-educated types. In this asylum, the sociologist [the academic in fact] is the director, the only one who has the right to go outside (Latour, 1996, 200).

Thus I suggest that a considered methodological approach to Caodaism might seem disunited, patchy even; combining anthropology; sociology; literary criticism; history; psychology; and so on. This should be an indication that the work is not an act of science examining the asylum; rather it is a product emanating from within the humanities, utilising these methods of understanding to observe and discuss varying aspects of the human condition connected with the faith that is *Dao Cao Dai*.

It would be moot to briefly mention some of the methodological approaches I have taken in my general research on Caodaism. The most valuable asset in my study of this faith so far has been access to the community. Students of Caodaism as far a field as Uppsala and Boston lack this one simple advantage granted to most Australians (there are Caodaist communities in most mainland capitals). The Swede or Bostonian must either travel from where they are and dedicate an especially packaged period of time to the study of a community, move in and live with a community, and/or rely on a textual analysis of the religion. In Australia, the student of Caodaism has the opportunity of going to and from the community as part of their daily routine. This simple difference, researching a community as part of one's quotidian world impresses upon the researcher the need to deal with the religion (and the researcher's own environment) in an entirely different manner. The necessary adaptability of community members to a life that the researcher also considers familiar, raises a number of interesting field research issues which may be considered in later articles, but the common experience of personhood between researcher and subject is underlined rather than the community's 'technicolour' strangeness.

One emerging area of study whose tools I found useful in complimenting a basic religious history and sociology approaches has been the methodologies developed in the field of performance studies. This discipline forces the student to consider the proxemics of each situation observed and examine ways in which the relationship between person and space is used to make meaning, in the case of this particular religion, the way in which community and sacredness, and to an extent self-identity, is created and communicated through action (see Butler, 1987; Goffman, 1959; Cohen, 1985). Using these tools, the student must also be continually aware of the place that he or she takes within a certain space and be

mindful of how their observations affect a certain scene. Such an approach can be criticised on the grounds that it leaves the 'actors' stranded on stage and at a significant distance from the 'audience' that is, the researcher. However, if we consider that all the world is a stage, then the researcher must also consider him or herself part of the action, and report as genuinely as possible the scene as it appears.

In examining the proximics of the Caodaist community in Sydney, there is one term that I have found particularly useful – especially in light of the mammoth (and in relation to Eastern religions rather useless) methodological debate regarding the 'insideness' and 'outsideness' of religious traditions and the academy. It is the Sino-vietnamese concept of *trung/zhong*. Of this word Angela Zito writes,

In ritual usage, the word *zhong* (centre) does not mean 'inside' that is *nei*, whose antonym is *wai* 'outside'; *zhong* has no proper opposite term. As a noun it means "middle," but an empty one, found between the inner and the outer, where upper and lower meet and where there is no movement in the four directions. As a verb *zhong* means to hit the centre. "Centring" thus constantly creates itself through the correct separation of upper and lower, the corrected bounding of inner and outer. Conceived of in this manner, it is the mediating third that makes meaningful difference possible. When people "make the triad with Heaven and Earth" they *zhong*, providing meaningful connection between these two constantly related forces. (Zito, 1997: 30.)

Not only can this term be used to explain the process of Chinese imperial solstice sacrifice and Caodaist worship, but it also presents a methodological approach to the study of the community. *Zhonging* is a centring that leads to further centring. To *zhong* methodologically means placing the student of Caodaism between extremes and within a space of forever coming to understand both the religion *and* the assumptions of the academy. In this way the student can more clearly examine the relation of imposed categories such as 'insideness' and 'outsideness.'

Backed up by textual analysis, questionnaires, casual discussions and translation work, this approach of '*zhonging*' forms another methodological approach to the study of various aspects of Caodaism. I feel I have been able to address with more insight the many dimensions of the Caodaist community in Sydney and avoided many of the pitfalls we saw in some of the texts quoted above. In short, I have tried to adhere to Blagov's suggestion of an interdisciplinary approach and I hope this sort of approach recommends itself to other students who might be encouraged to study *Austral-Asian* religious traditions such as Caodaism.

Through years of hard work, and a great deal of confusion and frustration this small group of people have overcome some very interesting administrative barriers inherent in the Australian system, not to mention conquering the complexities of the English language, in order to build their temple in Wiley Park. In the process they have turned *Dao Cao Dai* into an Australian phenomenon. What was once over 'there' in Asia is now very concretely 'here,' represented by this gift to our

nation. As this temple is now a part of our suburban landscape it is up to all of us, for the sake of understanding ourselves, to rethink descriptive approaches to this faith and its communities. *Dao Cao Dai* is not ‘Disneyesque,’ nor is it ‘childlike,’ nor is it merely a political phenomenon. We have to declare that the Western eye in general, has failed to see this religious tradition for what it is and admit that new ways of understanding must be found, moreover that Australian academics are uniquely placed to discover these new ways. This temple and many others now being built in the suburbs of Australia, offers the academy a special insight into the themes of Asian life as well as a new look at the spiritual dimensions of our own country. We are lucky to be able to have such opportunities available to us and we should be more eager to take advantage of them.

Endnotes

¹ A phrase found in Allan Kardec’s *Le Livre des médiums*, first published 1861.

² ‘Ru’ is the tradition of scholarly philosophy that we erroneously label ‘Confucianism’. Daoism’ is the official Pin Yin romanisation of the Chinese character rendered under the Wade-Giles romanisation system as ‘Tao’.

³ ‘La race française et la race annamite sont mes deux bénites’ - spirit message from ‘Dieu Tout Puissant’ 27 October 1926 in *Les Messages Spirites*, Tai Xuat Ban 1999, 36.

⁴ ‘Cao Dai’ is the name of God for Caodaists. Thus calling Tin Do Cao Dai ‘Cao Dai’ is akin to calling Muslims ‘The Allahs’ or Christians ‘The Christs.’

⁵ For an interesting account of the “unveiling” of the restored and overly colourful Sistine Chapel ceiling see Waldemar (1991).

⁶ Unfortunately Gorman has seriously misinterpreted Vietnamese hospitality. Although Caodaism is a missionising religion, it has not yet won more than a handful of Western converts in the last 76 years. I think visitors to the Holy See are more than safe from conversion.

⁷ In slang ‘Mickey Mouse’ pertains to that which is ‘...less in seriousness or value than its name would suggest.’ That is: a confidence trick, a sham. (Delbridge et al., 1991: 1122).

⁸ Here I am referring to the book rather than the thesis. The thesis draws more subtle conclusions, yet the argument is ultimately the same, for example: ‘The Cao Dai movement should thus be seen primarily as a political problem. Its religious, cultural and organisational features are interesting as they help shed light on the character of the movement. They, in themselves, however, cannot explain why the Cao Dai arose.’ see Jayne Susan Werner (1976).

⁹ The exact phrase in French is ‘Bouddhisme rénové, spiritisme vietnamien, religion nouvelle en Eurasie.’ My point is that he concentrates on the Buddhist rather than the Daoist, Christian, or any other dimension of the religion.

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