

Vietnamese Esoterica and the Chinese Mystical Model

Christopher Hartney

Western academics like to draw clear distinctions between ‘politics’ and ‘religion’,¹ ‘religion’ and ‘art’,² ‘Orient’ and ‘Occident’,³ and then often find themselves caught upon their own sharp delineations. Caodaism, a new religious movement from Vietnam, stands as a clear example of how careful we must be if we are to avoid being hoisted upon the definitional hooks of our own petards. Certainly, the Caodaist experience challenges how we might delineate those areas that in the West can be more easily labelled ‘esoteric’ or ‘exoteric’. This paper will examine how the Chinese mystical model has helped supply Vietnam with a vast tradition of ideas considered ‘esoteric’ and how these ideas are owned and incorporated by different sections of the Caodaist faith. When terms such as ‘exoteric’ and ‘esoteric’ are applied to Caodaism, we find that these categories are charged with some very immediate historical concerns. The first hurdle on the way to a more complete understanding of this issue comes from how we might grasp at some of the dimensions of the Chinese cosmological model that has had an incredible influence on this new faith. It is a model that provides the backbone for ways in which the esoteric dimension of the *dao* or ‘way’ is comprehended. As a first step towards a comprehensive overview of Caodaist esoterica, this paper will demonstrate some of the ways in which the Chinese model has influenced these conceptualisations. Moreover this paper will also discuss how the supposedly ‘exoteric’ main branch of Caodaism, based around the Holy See in *Tay Ninh* (hereafter called *Tay Ninh* Caodaism,

1 See: Garry W. Trompf, ‘Religion, Politics and the University’, in *Arts*, Sydney, Vol. 21, 1999, 93-110, *passim*.

2 On this issue see, Earle J. Coleman, *Creativity and Spirituality: Bonds Between Art and Religion*, SUNY Press, New York, 1998, *passim*.

3 Said provides the most eminent but not only study of the political uses behind speaking of an ‘Orient;’ see Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1978, *passim*.

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attempts to lessen the legitimacy of sects that claim the esoteric upper-hand. *Tay Ninh* Caodaism does this by speaking of access to the esoteric through exoteric means.

‘Prior to the mid-nineteenth century...’ Antoine Faivre tells us, ‘...there was no single name for the body of ideas that we refer to today as esotericism’. The term is a fabrication based on the Greek *esoterikos* simply meaning ‘inner’ and used in this manner by the ‘occultist’ Eliphas Lévi.¹ The development of this word in the twentieth century suggests that, with growing secularisation of the cosmos by means of the hard sciences, the Western mind needed to coin a term that could distinguish the religiously philosophical from the strictly ‘rational’. Esotericism, Faivre avers, is a word that, allows us to speak of the relationships between the divine, humanity and the universe - relationships rejected by the formal Aristotelianism that developed into the science that we know today. Again, we face a clear example of language being re-adjusted to accommodate the changing landscape of this particular field. This word becomes a cover-term that has found currency in describing a Western development. Like so many Western concepts, it sits uneasily when translated into the Eastern sphere. Nevertheless, its use has become common amongst Caodaists themselves when speaking in English because it generally accords with previously established terms in Chinese and Vietnamese. The following note found inside a set of *Chieu Minh* books presented to the author in Vancouver clearly encapsulates how this translation of terms is affected.

1. Tay Ninh for (exotericism)

Tell people get in Cao Dai religion

Leader [sic] by Pham Cong Tac

Le Van Trung

2. Chieu Minh Tam Thanh for (esotericism)

practise meditation to be come [sic] the deliverance

(private, secret)

¹ Antoine Faivre, ‘Esotericism’, in M. Eliade (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, Macmillan, New York, 1987, Vol. 5, p. 156.

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Leade [sic] by Ngo Minh Chieu

My name: Dang Van Thu.

Although it may seem anecdotal, this note encapsulates many conversations I have had with Caodaists regarding this issue. It is therefore moot to pick apart some of assumptions that underpin Mr Dang Van Thu's words. When he mentions the division between the esoteric and the exoteric, he is thinking of the Vietnamese terms *Vo Vi* and *Pho Do* that are at the heart of the battle of minds to which this paper refers. Before we address this point further, it would be sensible to go into a short examination of the Chinese model.

Werner suggests that Caodaism is mostly 'Taoistic in nature...' and although this statement holds little water when looking at other dimensions of the religion, as far as the esoteric is concerned, she is close to the truth.¹ There are two major elements of daoist 'esotericism' that strongly influence Caodaist thought. One of the most important developments in early religious Daoism (and much later for Caodaism) was the advent of *Yü Huang* - the 'Jade Emperor'. This idea of the 'Supreme Being', conceptualised as the heavenly emperor, translates, with a little Christian flavour, into Cao Dai the God *sans pareil* of the Caodaists. *Yü Huang* has been part of the Daoist canon of deities since the *Tang* dynasty (618-906 CE). This supreme God follows in the tradition, as Anna Seidel illustrates, of *Shang di* the original ancestor of the Shang Dynasty (circa. 1700BCE – 1100 BCE) who was elevated to the position of heavenly counter-part to the emperor. As the *Tang* dynasty perfected its universal bureaucratic system, *Yü-Huang* emerged as the pinnacle of this heavenly reflection of the Chinese governmental system.²

An official state cult was launched in his name in 1017. He is the '...supernatural ruler of the universe',³ and represents the ideal ruler. His

¹ Jayne Susan Werner, *Peasant Politics and Religious Sectarianism: Peasant and Priest in the Cao Dai in Viet Nam*, Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, New Haven, Connecticut, 1981, p. 6.

² Anna Seidel, 'Yü Huang,' in M. Eliade (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religions*, Macmillan, New York, 1987, Vol. 15, p. 541.

³ *Loc. cit.*

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role is made very clear in popular works such as *Feng Shen Yeng I* [Canonisation of The Deities] characters from which decorate the Caodaist's Great Divine Temple in Tay Ninh, and *Xi You Ji* [Journey to the West/Monkey], where, as Jade Emperor, he is conceived of as being the pinnacle of heaven, but not necessarily omnipotent. Reinforcing the connection between *Yü Huang* and *Cao Dai* we find that their anniversaries fall on the same day.¹ In a perfectly ordered hierarchy under these figures a pantheon of buddhas, gods, saints, geniis and spirits were conceptualised in the same way as the imperial court and its bureaucracy were structured on earth. As the ultimate ideal ruler *Yü Huang* or *Cao Dai* conferred advancement on all the other immortals in this celestial hierarchy.

What is most important is that this 'courtly' system allows for the sinification of the reincarnation system of India (*samsāra*). In China, reincarnation becomes a process of returning home to the palaces of heaven to have one's life assessed. A lifetime is conceived of as an embassy from heaven to the lower worlds in order to spread the *dao*. Good results lead to a better position and a more important mission in the next life. Thus people who do great things - Joan of Arc, Victor Hugo, Sun Yat Sen, are seen as great souls who regularly reincarnate to do great things on earth; the soul that is Krishna in one life, can reincarnate in the next as the Christ and so on. This is why Caodaists do not blanch when poets, military leaders, and philosophers, as well as deities, are included in their canon of notables.

The other element of the Chinese model that has had an incredible influence in Vietnam is the Daoist concept of the body and its manipulation for the sake of longevity. The (*Huang Ti Nei Ching Su Wen*) or *Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine* contains perhaps the most famous system of meditation practice known by the term *wu wei*, or 'non-contrivance'. This term translates into Vietnamese as *vo vi*, the phrase Caodaists put into English as 'esoteric'. As Kristofer Shipper notes *wu wei* for a Daoist is about '...keeping the One',² that is, bringing all the elements, the chemicals and the guardian deities of the body into

¹ That is the ninth day of the first lunar month.

² Kristofer Schipper, *Le Corps Taoïste*, Fayard, Paris, 1982, 'Réaliser ce mystère du corps est une maternité: "Garder l'Un." Ce terme ne recouvre pas simplement un expérience mystique, mais encore un pratique concrète du corps', p. 174.

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harmony as one would a well-functioning imperial hierarchy.¹ Thus, there are very strong micro- and macro- cosmic correlations between conceptions of heaven and conceptions of the inward life of the body and this is also connected with the governmental reality of China and Vietnam which stands as the other measure of understanding. The summoning and imagining, in a vast parade, of the gods of the body as form of meditation links back to the immense hierarchy of gods and elevated souls in heaven and in the body. There seems to be a patterning of the structure in the microcosmic and macrocosmic *mundus imaginalis* of Chinese and Vietnamese 'esotericism'.

Henry Corbin, in *En Islam Iranien*, when referring to the space of mystical dimensions, speaks of an '...imaginal world...' ² which is '...a place of intermediary beings, the mesocosm possessing a geography of its own and perceptible to each of us according to our respective cultural images'. Corbin's picture of the 'esoteric' is more uniquely developed in Caodaism by the fact that this imaginary faculty is built upon by séance, a device that, Caodaists assert, facilitates direct communication with the spirit world. Certainly it is a communication device that is partly a tapping into the collective sub-consciousness of those in the faith that also allows traditional ideas, mainly Chinese, to be effectively adapted to the cultural landscape of colonial and post-colonial Vietnam.

We should keep in mind that, because of this tradition, Caodaism is a religion that is already esoteric. It is dedicated to 'keeping the One'. Its doctrines, and for *Tay Ninh* Caodaism, its hierarchy, represents an ongoing coming-into-balance of both *yin/yang* forces and the *tam giao* - that is, the three main East-Asian doctrines: Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. As in China, ancestor worship is also a vital part of the religion, this is again a point of synthesis, or bridging phenomena, where

¹ *Ibid*, 175. Schipper quotes 'The Master Who Embraces Simplicity' as follows: 'Sachez que l'être humain est le plus spirituel des êtres vivants. Mais il doit se connaître lui-meme, et garder ses esprits [en lui] afin d'écartier toutes les mauvaises influences. Ceux qui savent faire cela n'ont point à implorer le secours des dieux célestes, mais il leur suffit de retenir ceux (i.e. les dieux) de leur corps. C'est pourquoi il est dit: 'le corps de l'homme est l'image d'un pays; potrine et ventre sont comme des palais et demeurs; les quatres membres sont banlieues, les articulations les fonctionnaires [...] Ceux qui savent gouverner leur corps savent gouverner leur pays'.

² Henry Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, Gallimard, Paris, 1991, *passim*.

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life and afterlife come together in a special socially prescribed harmony. This is obvious in Caodaist ritual, which we will discuss below. Caodaism began in Vietnam in 1926 at a time when unities were being sought in a horribly bifurcated world. Age-old Daoist traditions of mediumship sparked off influences of Western Spiritism that were being introduced to Vietnam by the French. As I argue in my thesis,¹ Caodaism was in part, a response to an ‘explosion in consciousnesses’ effected by French colonialism. Caodaism was many things but it was also a social space of unity and balance; if you will, a way of keeping the social ‘One’.

To follow these ends, Caodaism claims to be a religion of syncretism, bringing all the faiths of the world together. To reinforce this universalism there are a number of Western influences introduced into Caodaist doctrine, many of them Catholic. The most Catholic part of the religion is its complex structure. Its laws and practices are said to be revealed through séance, though from almost the first revelation the religion began splitting into sects. The earliest split came when the original adept, Ngo Minh Chieu, left to return to his own secluded tradition. His followers claim to be the keepers of the *vo vi* or ‘esoteric’ tradition of Caodaism. The *Tay Ninh* mainstream however, refers to itself as the *Pho do* tradition. *Pho do* can be roughly translated as ‘salvation’, referring to a non-secluded popular tradition – one that is obviously ‘exoteric’ in its public rituals and hierarchy. Nevertheless, *Tay Ninh* Caodaists fight against the assumption that they represent *only* the ‘exoteric’ nature of the religion. Rather, if we were speaking of ‘nature’ I would suggest that one of the main characteristics of *Tay Ninh* Caodaism is its *will to institutionalisation*. *Tay Ninh* Caodaism is séance and spiritism institutionalised; it is charity and good works institutionalised, and we even find the *tam giao* or three religions of China are institutionalised in the three streams of this branch’s hierarchy.² *Tay Ninh* Caodaism is also esotericism institutionalised.

¹ Christopher Hartney, *A Strange Peace: Dao Cai Dai and its Manifestation in Sydney*, PhD thesis, University of Sydney, Chapter Two, 2004.

² The hierarchy of *Tay Ninh* is divided horizontally into ranks from student priest to pope, but it is also divided vertically, firstly into male and female streams and secondly into streams that reflect the *tam giao*: Buddhist, Daoist and Confucian streams. Ritual gowns reflect this division with officials either wearing yellow, blue or red respectively.

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For a religion that at its heart is about ‘...keeping the One’, sectarianism in Caodaism remains a point of constant concern. Ngo Minh Chieu split from what would become the *Tay Ninh* group under a cloud of secrecy. Most commentators suggest that Chieu was a ascetic who could not agree with other early dignitaries and their policies of taking Caodaism to the masses, which accounted for its phenomenal early growth. Others suggest that Chieu was elbowed out in an early power play.¹ Followers of the *Chieu Minh* group - those who separated from *Tay Ninh* with Chieu - follow a series of very strict rules. Celibate from the time they enter, vegetarianism is mandatory. Entry is conditional on the tossing of *yin/yang* blocks; if these land in the correct order, the initiate may enter; if not they must come back months later and repeat the process. A letter of dedication must be presented. After a few months of attendance, the adept must toss the blocks again in order to be allowed into the secrets of meditation. Three years and eight months later, he or she may apply to enter the final stage. Oliver notes one eye-witness saying that she saw, ‘...Chieu Minh followers running on the spot, [whilst] others lay on the floor for about two minutes, and some swung their arms up and down’.² A Caodaist in Sydney noted that *Chieu Minh* who stay with him sleep sitting in a chair. In fact, *Chieu Minh* are buried in the seated position, all to ensure correct flow of microcosmic essences even after death. Unlike mainstream Caodaism, where only general cleanliness is requested, washing is an essential part of *Chieu Minh* ritual. Oliver adds, ‘These Caodaists avoid fasting or any emphasis on miracles, hypnosis, trances, or other psychological states; on the contrary, they emphasise the necessity of correct ritual procedures to guarantee success’.³ Ultimate success means liberation of the soul and elevation by the universal spirit of Cao Dai.

The attraction for Caodaists in general to the *Chieu Minh* are many. One is that séances can be held within the small leaderless meditation

¹ Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1983, p. 85. Note: unfortunately those séance messages relating to the departure of Ngo Minh Chieu have never been released, possibly because of the esteem in which he is held.

² Victor Oliver, *Caodai Spiritism*, E.J.Brill, Leiden, 1976, p. 80. This behaviour accords with a number of accounts of Daoist *qi* work.

³ *Loc . cit.*

halls of the *Chieu Minh*, and so it is perceived that the connection with the esoteric dimensions of Caodaism is much closer. These séances, which are less formal than in other forms of Caodaism, allow adepts to put questions directly to the spirit world and those spirits that communicate remain close at hand to act as guardians during the adept's progress along the Way. *Tay Ninh* séance is centralised in the main temple; séance may only take place officially when conducted by the college of mediums meeting in the area before the main altar (the *cung dao*). *Tay Ninh* Caodaists believe that séance held in any other place is open to corruption by the King of Hell who has special license from *Duc Cao Dai* to wreak havoc in these instances. Nevertheless, the place of Ngo Minh Chieu in the hearts of most Caodaists, and the extreme asceticism of *Chieu Minh* followers presents a very virtuous thorn in the side to some *Tay Ninh* Caodaists; particularly when the continued presence of the *Chieu Minh* can challenge the legitimacy of *Tay Ninh's* heritage. In fact, the easiest way to challenge a *Tay Ninh* follower is to say, as Mr Dang in Vancouver has said, 'Tay Ninh for exoterism.... Chieu Minh Tam Thanh for esotericism'. It is interesting to note that this criticism is also used against Caodaists in general by the followers of *Ssu Ma Ching Hai*, a recent and popular Buddhist figure.¹ The regular response to such criticism by *Tay Ninh* Caodaists is to say, '...but *pho do* is *vo vi*'.² Let us examine how this is possible.

The official name of *Tay Ninh* Caodaism is *Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do* or third period for religious salvation. With *pho do* in the official name there is no denying that the religion is salvationist and popular. Its highly ritualised structure leaves no doubt that *Tay Ninh* Caodaism is exoteric but the faith also claims to be universal. To claim universality it has to accommodate those looking for a more 'esoteric' experience. That is what Mr S is after. This adept explained to me how the Great Divine Temple can be understood as a vast *qi* generator. He explained how the essences of the cosmos entered through the central dome of the temple, the *Nghing Phuong Dai*. Until meeting Mr S, this part of the temple had been described as *La dôme de canonisation* (its French name). However, its Vietnamese name *Nghing Phuong Dai* does indeed

¹ *Pers. Comm.* with Trang Bui and Xu Lee, 10 June 2001, who discussed a number of ways they had heard people criticise Caodaism.

² *Pers. Comm.*, Dao Cong Tam, 13 May 2001.

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translate as ‘...tower to welcome the wind’. At the start of all *dai le*, or great ceremonies, men and women walk clockwise or anti-clockwise around the Great Divine Temple. This is called ‘stirring up the *yin* and *yang*’. When male and female stop and come together with the men on one side and the women on the other, their bows to each other recognize a special coming-into-harmony. As male and female come together in worship, they ‘...form a bellows - like the coming together of heaven and earth, and this makes more *qi* essence’.¹

Caodaists worship God through the symbol of the eye. The importance of this is made clear by a message delivered by *Duc Cao Dai* on 26/2/1926:

The eye is the motor of the heart

The sovereign master of visual perception

The visual perception depends on the principle of intelligent illumination

The principle of intelligent illumination relies on the Divine Principle

The Divine Principle – that is ME! ²

The eye is also vital, argues Mr S, because it protects people during a very dangerous operation. While adepts bow before the eye, music commences. The rituals for great ceremonies are complicated and comprise seven distinct parts. The rites and music are precisely explained in fifty-eight articles written by the Holy See in *Tay Ninh*. As the music plays adepts stare into a symbol the Divine Eye. This is an extremely powerful image hung above the altar.³ Prolonged gazing at this symbol could certainly lead to altered states of thinking and together with ritual music and incense, possibly produce a very strong sense of the numinous. Mr S recounted how the *Ho Phap*, or guardian of the laws, is located in spirit at the back of the temple. This is where the *Ho Phap* altar is positioned. Mr S suggested that while prayers and music continue, the third eye, or pole star eye located on the front-top of the cranium is opened by spiritual force, and the *Ho Phap* from his elevated

1 *Pers. Comm.*, Mr S [name withheld], Tay Ninh, Vietnam, June 1998.

2 Anon, *An Outline of Caodaism*, (no place), Chan Tam Publishing, 1994, p. 35.

3 A complete explanation of this eye and the symbolism around it can be found in, Tran Van Rang, *Ly Giai qua Can Khoa Bat Quai Cao Dai*, Dai-Dao Nam Thu 48, Tay Ninh, 1974.

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position at the back of the temple ‘...is able to guide the spiritual essences emanating from the worshipper's head towards the *Bat Quai Dai* or altar area, and on to heaven’.¹

The next phase of the ritual is also symbolic of Daoist ‘esoteric’ practice for this is where the three treasures or *tam buu* are offered. The three treasures are, flowers, wine and tea. While chanting at various stages ‘I offer all my body...’ then ‘...all my mind...’ and finally, ‘...all my soul to Duc Cao Dai...’ the adepts watch as the leader of ceremonies makes certain offerings on the altar. Flowers represent the body, wine the mind and tea the soul. These are slowly brought to the altar by ritual officials walking in steps that draw the Chinese character *xin* (or, in Vietnamese, *tam*) meaning ‘heartfulness’. In a way we have in this ceremony the three treasures of the body given over to heaven for balancing rather than ask that the adept do this through private meditation.

Cao daist architecture is a *philosophia sacra* which is literally institutionalised in the form and features of the *Tay Ninh* temple which overflows with mystical symbology. For Mr S the temple is its own reflection of the great cosmic order. The Temple is a machine for the preservation of the religious life of the community and a machine for the preservation of the essence of each worshipper. The operation of the temple during ritual closely parallels the operation of the Chinese (Daoist) cosmos. One could easily interpret Mr S's words as suggesting that worship in the temple helps reinvigorate not only the worshipper and the community, but also the cosmos by the way it brings *yin* and *yang* together for the generation of essences. There is also another meaning, yet to be fully investigated, but which Schipper outlines in his description of the Daoist microcosmic landscape, in particular the head. Schipper writes of mountains surrounding a lake, and, having a valley which is the nose, towers which are ears (and so on...),² Although there

¹ Mr S, *loc. cit.*

² Schipper, *op cit*, p. 145. ‘Que voit-on? Le paysage de la tête est d’abord celui d’une montagne élevée, ou plutôt une chaîne de pics qui entourent un lac central. Ce lac se situe à mi-hauteur entre l’occiput et le point entre les sourcils (le miroir). Au milieu du lac se dresse une architecture palatiale. Elle a neuf pièces, huit sur le pourtout carré et une milieu. C’est le Palais des Lumières (Ming Tang), la maison du calendrier des rois de la Chine ancienne. Devant ce Ming Tang et le lac qui l’entoure s’ouvre une vallée (le nez). L’entrée de la vallée est gardée par deux tours (les

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are at least three ways of understanding Cao daist temple architecture,¹ it is not too far fetched to suggest a fourth - that the two-towered, nine-levelled Great Divine Temple, has an even more intrinsic esoteric meaning than Mr S was prepared to, or could, suggest. The Temple can be understood as both the cosmos and the body. Thus all three, cosmos, body and temple can be read by the light of the same plan.

The way in which esoteric elements are best institutionalised, however, is in the initiatives of *Duc Ho Phap* [Venerable guarder of the *dharma*] Pham Cong Tac. Using séance to aid him, Pham Cong Tac was the main force behind the completion of the Great Divine Temple. In the early years of the religion he was also the central figure behind the building of a number of meditation retreats around Tay Ninh and the establishment of a charity body. The overall system into which these institutions were to fit is best detailed in the set of sermons he delivered and published as *Con Duong Thieng Lieng Hang Song* or 'The Path to Eternal Life'. The principal section of these sermons are the accounts by Pham Cong Tac of his esoteric flights into the heavens and the accompanying promise that those who have dedicated their lives to the religion will be able, in a process of meditation lasting one hundred days, follow his footsteps, permitting them access to such sacred machinery as the 'book without words'; this being the book that recounts the *karma* account of each adept. His words in these sermons are very chatty, for example,

From tonight Ban Dao [i.e. 'Poor Monk' a humble epithet] is not really teaching you, I am only recounting what I have seen... As Ban Dao talks, the children of God must imagine that you have a guide. Wherever you go, the guide will explain the scene to you. For example when a foreigner comes to Vietnam, the visitor is provided with a guide to help explain the scenery...²

oreilles)'. The description continues in this style outlining other features of the head-come-heaven].

- 1 As an entry point to the heavens, as a reflection of the nine heavens/the cosmos, and as a concretisation of the administrative hierarchy of the faith.
- 2 Pham Cong Tac, *Con Duong Thien Lien Hang Song* (The Path to Eternal Life), translated by Dao Cong Tam and Christopher Hartney, 22 June 2001, <http://www.personal.usyd.edu.au/~cdao/hpser1.htm>

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These suggestive descriptions constitute part of the journey into the heavens. We need to keep in mind that all these sermons were delivered after several hours of ritual when the listeners in the congregation would have already been deeply effected by the effects of worship. Indeed, here he presents a glimpse of that most esoteric of goals: access to the heavens. This is what Caodaism was offering to those seeking the *vo vi* experience but, apart from listening to, or later reading, these sermons, the only access to this meditative realm was via a life dedicated to *pho do*.

As Pham Cong Tac begins to describe heaven in the first sermon, he quickly steps back to discuss the three methods of ‘...returning to the Supreme Being, and gaining a position in the spiritual hierarchy’. All of his answers are connected with institutions. The first way is to be born into a soul that has the ability to work its way up through the governing hierarchy of the religion. Here he makes it clear that a position in the quite exoteric administration automatically elevates the office holder’s position in heaven. As one climbs the ranks of the hierarchy of the *Cuu Trung Dai* (the administrative hierarchy), one is actually elevating the soul by completing good works for the *dao*.

The second method is by climbing the twelve levels of the charity body called the *Hoi-Thanh Phuoc Thien*. And here too the esoteric path of Caodaism in Tay Ninh is described as a choice adepts have regarding what institution they enter, whether it be the administrative branch, or the charity branch. If, after joining these institutions and succeeding in them, an adept still needs to seek further esoteric experience, then another institution is offered - that of the meditation centre. Pham Cong Tac notes that, ‘...at the meditation centre adepts will learn the method of transforming matter (*ching/tinh*, our body, vitality) into energy (*qi/khi*) and then transform that energy into spirit (*shen/than*)’.¹ This is the unity of the three treasures (*tinh khi than hiep nhac*). This process was said to take one hundred days for the successful adept.

Only after mentioning these three institutional options does the Ho Phap return to his account of the celestial spheres. Once the soul gets itself to the altar area of the main temple, the astral-traveller (or deceased soul) will find there no roof but a ‘...vast sea, which is so great, it is unimaginable. At this point...’ he continues, ‘...we begin to walk the

¹ Pham Cong Tac, *op. cit.*

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Divine Path to Eternal Life'.¹ Thus the *Ho Phap* not only emphasises the institutionalised possibilities of what we would call the 'esoteric' but he does so through the 'institution' of the sermon, turning previous conceptions of *vo vi* practice to a new medium. One can conceive of how the esoteric tradition in Caodaism in general has developed as a considered response to those prevailing esoteric assumptions we find in *Chieu Minh* practice. It should also be stated that as the sermons progress (I regret I cannot give a fuller account in this paper of the material our translation is revealing) the chatty style continues to address celestial ideas in very institution-based ways; courts, palaces, airports and railway stations all feature in Pham Cong Tac's descriptions. Oliver comments that '...one of the basic premises of the structure of [Tay Ninh] Caodaism is that those who attain higher rank in this life receive a higher status and reward in the next'.²

It is clear that *Tay Ninh* Caodaists have at their disposal a ready set of arguments against those groups who suggest that this particular brand of Caodaism is bound to the exoteric. For the religion has obviously needed to develop a universalist appeal and inherent in that appeal is a need to satisfy both the esoteric and exoteric needs of its followers and potential converts. For many other reasons, political and historical, (indeed the persecution of the faith in Vietnam is a central reason) *Tay Ninh* Caodaism is in a leaderless transitional period where such ideas as these are being used to break the stasis in which the faith currently finds itself. The picture of current attitudes to the machinations behind the esoteric in Caodaism remain interesting because they will continue to be a serious point of doctrinal dispute between *Tay Ninh* and other branches of Caodaism. The way in which Caodaists address this question will determine whether parts of the faith continue to grow or continue to wallow in the current torpor. We have also seen how Caodaists of both *Tay Ninh* and *Chieu Minh* lineage have attempted to claim the *vo vi* upper hand. And it is because of the organisational and political imperatives behind these developments that Westerners have to be doubly careful when they listen to Caodaists speaking of the 'esoteric' in relation to Vietnamese faith in general, and Caodaism in particular.

¹ *Ibid.*

² Oliver, *op. cit.*, p. 76.