

# Syncretism and the End of Religion(s)

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Formerly people of the world lacked means of transportation, therefore they did not know each other... Nowadays, all parts of the world are explored: humanity, knowing itself better, aspires to real peace. But because of the very multiplicity of religions, humanity does not always live in harmony. That is why I decided to unite all these religions into One to bring them back to the primordial unity.<sup>1</sup>

The essential message of Baha'u'llah is that of unity. He taught that there is only one God, that there is only one human race, and that all the world's religions have been stages in the revelation of God's will and purpose for humanity. In this day, Baha'u'llah said, humanity has collectively come of age. As foretold in all of the world's scriptures, the time has come for the uniting of all peoples into a peaceful and integrated global society.<sup>2</sup>

## **The story so far...**

One of the more common myths of history has it that the planet was dark in ignorance of itself but the world, as we 'know' it, has been discovered and is now suddenly a global entity. Certainly in this age, we have a unique perspective - the one received from the space program during the seventies. Here was a single blue-green globe spinning through the vastness of space. With this image planted deep within us, we like to believe that ideas shoot around the world at the speed of light, and their translatability from culture to culture is as simple a matter as market penetration of over-sugared soft drinks. In this age, more than any other, we tell ourselves, a new type of unity is being created. In fact there has been the perception of a great change, certainly in the religious sphere: once a particular

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<sup>1</sup> Message received from heaven through seance to the Caodaist religion (1926). Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do, *The Third Universal Amnesty* (pamphlet), Washington, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> *The Bahá'is*, Oakham, Leicestershire, 1992, p. 5.

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religious cosmology had claim to universality if 'everyone' accepted it. Yet a religion's universality was conditional - there was the 'known' world, or the 'empire', or the 'middle kingdom'. Religions were national, continental perhaps, but the barbarians over the last hill had their own lesser systems of belief, they did not rise to heaven, often they did not even pass into hell, they simply did not matter. However today when a particular religion and its attendant cosmology claims 'universality' that claim must be, in the least, global. This perceived need has given rise to an interesting development in some examples of new religious activity which can be best understood through the prism of syncretism. It is a syncretism that does not try to bring together only the tradition or cosmology next door. It is not a syncretism that mediates between two pre-existing traditions, but a syncretism that claims a union of *all* religious faiths within the over-arching mechanism of an emergent *über*-faith. One which will parallel, or even supersede the United Nations - a universal religion for a single planet. New religions such as the Bahá'í Faith and Dao Cao Dai (Caodaism) make universal claims in this manner. They imply the end of all religions and the commencement of one great Religion. Certainly, this is not the first time in history that these claims have been made, but they do beg the question - will this reaction to a new globalism herald the end of religion/s?

The Bahá'í Faith and Caodaism are both millenarian, their cosmologies aim for a heaven-on-earth to come, yet they also promise their believers a paradisiacal unity with the Supreme Being. Both religions are increasing at an extraordinary rate. Yet what is most interesting is the call, implied in their teachings, for the end of religions. Their attitude to other faiths does not depend on old forms of intolerance as we have known it, nor do they preach traditional theologies of superiority such as *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*.<sup>1</sup> Rather, these faiths use their newness to impress upon would be converts that all religions constitute steps towards a particular global objective. Where parts of mainstream religions, for example Christians in the creationist mold, may continue to combat the hypotheses of Darwin as well as the assumptions of natural and social evolution, these newer faiths appropriate such patterns to declare that all humanity is, or should be, evolving towards a single global belief: the *homo sapiens* of faith. They declare that in the age to come, there will be an end to religions in the plural. They declare in fact that they are that end. This essay is a broad

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<sup>1</sup> 'Outside the Church no salvation', a key pillar of Catholic dogma.

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examination of these two religions. It considers their approach to globalism, and most importantly, how they seem to use the 'syncretic' processes as a way of explaining their religion in relation to other faiths. This paper will also examine how they contend with problems inherent in such a unifying approach. I will also examine some of the issues scholars wrestle with when using the term 'syncretism', why it is such a loaded word, yet so useful in this context. I will illustrate ways in which we can use it in a New Religious Movements context.

Before starting, I would like to stress the importance of these two developing faiths for I fear their significance would be lost on many readers. The Bahá'í religion claims to be the second most widespread religion in the world.<sup>1</sup> It has dedicated a vast amount of energy to establishing itself throughout the 'majority world'<sup>2</sup> which accounts in part for its global diversity. Now global and peace-loving, it came from very militant origins. The background of the faith was the often disaffected and politically powerless Persian Shi'a strain of Islam cradled within the Ottoman Empire. From the rather millenarian Imam Mahdhi (or 'hidden' imam) section of this community sprang the forerunner to the Bahá'í faith, Babism. Led by Siyyad 'Alí Muhammad Shírází (1814-1850), Babism came into the light in 1844. Much politico-religious action and armed struggle led to the execution of the Bab and a foiled assassination attempt on the Shah. Thus by 1852, as MacEoin tells us, 'as a political force [they were] clearly spent.'<sup>3</sup> Mírzá Husayn 'Ali Núrí, a follower of the Bab eventually came to lead the remnants of the group as Bahá'u'llah (d.1892). From Islamic militancy to a faith of global and peaceful aims, Bahá'u'llah transformed the movement. His son and great-grandson, though of lessening spiritual import, continued guiding the new faith. In 1963, Bahá'ís themselves estimated that there were about four hundred thousand of their co-religionists in the world.<sup>4</sup> In 1993 the *Encyclopedia Britannica* put the number at five million. Figures for Caodaism are harder to trace, but a similar story unfolds.

Caodaism has not been influenced by Bahá'ísm one iota, but it is fascinating to compare and contrast the two faiths. One great difference is that Caodaism is a religion that has been revealed not

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<sup>1</sup> *The Bahá'ís*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Hopefully the reader will agree that 'majority world' is a little more appropriate than 'third world.'

<sup>3</sup> Denis MacEoin, 'From Babism to Baha'ism' in *Religion*, 1983, Vol. 13, p. 219.

<sup>4</sup> *The Bahá'ís*, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

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through lines of prophets but through seance, spiritism and shamanic traditions, both Eastern and Western. Caodaism manifests in the French Colony of southern Vietnam in 1926 as a *Dai Dao* or great way, that is, a religion that courses through all other religions. On a spiritual plane Dao Cao Dai seeks the unification of the *Tam Giao* or three main teachings of the Sino-Vietnamese world: Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism, but this seeking of the harmony of the three is also taken to mean the unification of all faith. Its doctrines are also obviously inclusive of Christianity in its French Catholic manifestation. Its worldly concerns seem to be the unification of Vietnam and France starting with the spiritual plane, 'La race française et la race annamite sont mes deux bënites,'<sup>1</sup> says the ultimate spirit in a seance message of 1926. Caodaism's figures are even more impressive than those of the Bahá'í faith. If we take the more conservative figures as an indication, in the first four years of Caodaism's existence, the religion gathered half a million followers,<sup>2</sup> a phenomenon that can be explained in part by Caodaism's appeal to many different perspectives through its syncretism.

By the nineteen fifties, Caodaism came close to being the most significant social institution in the south of Vietnam. It possessed its own army which had been trained by the Japanese during the war. The religion's leaders played a significant role at the Geneva and Paris conferences that oversaw the division of the nation into north and south in 1954. After 1945, members of the religion's hierarchy were invited to sit in the cabinet of Emperor Bao Dai. These events must mark Caodaism as one of the most successful new religious movements since the rise of Islam. Because of the current political situation in Vietnam, it is hard to estimate figures, but suggestions of four to six million adherents seem reasonable if one extrapolates more certain figures from the seventies. Although it is a missionising religion, Caodaism went global only after 1975. The flood of refugees escaping Vietnam at the end of the north-south war spread the faith around the world.

Despite these rather amazing facts, most religion scholars would know a little of Bahá'í faith and practically nothing of Caodaism. The latter has been relegated to dark ignorance by the violent history of Vietnam in the 20th century, and by a general lack of interest in Asia by new religion scholars. This is a shame, because

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<sup>1</sup> Message received 27 October 1926 in *Les Messages Spirites*, Tai xuat ban, 1999, p. 36, 'The French and the Vietnamese are my two favorites.'

<sup>2</sup> Victor Oliver, *Caodai Spiritism*, Leiden, 1976, p. 42.

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both faiths are informative with regard to a very interesting process which is best described as syncretic.

### **Crete**

Walking down the departmental corridor conducting my own poll, one colleague said he never used the word. Another suggested a neologism, 'syncretismic' as a way of avoiding the pejorative connotations of this politically dangerous word. Robert Baird says syncretism is '...a barrier to religio-historical understanding.'<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the word has its own complex history. Let us start with a fairly simple modern definition offered by Terence Thomas in the *Penguin Dictionary of Religions*:

The term used for the mixing together of diverse historical elements into a single whole. In the religious context it is often used in a pejorative sense since it is regarded as a process which causes impurity in what is claimed to be an otherwise pure form of religion based on an impeccable revelation. This is the way the term is often used in Christian theology. Claims have been made that Christianity and Islam are 'un-/anti-syncretistic'. However in the objective study of religions syncretism appears as a common feature of all observed religions and the process of delineating this study has been described as moving 'from a theological term of reproach to a concept in the science of religions'.<sup>2</sup>

From this broad overview, let us trace the word's development, to flesh out some of the more interesting facets of 'syncretism.' The entry in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* traces the word back to Plutarch who, in his *Moralia*,<sup>3</sup> identified the Cretans as the coiners of the word for they, '...despite the discord habitual among them,

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<sup>1</sup> Robert D. Baird, *Category Formation and the History of Religions*, Berlin and New York, 1991, p. 148.

<sup>2</sup> Terrence Thomas, 'Syncretism,' *Penguin Dictionary of Religions*, John R. Hinnells (ed.), Harmondsworth, p. 507.

<sup>3</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia*, Cambridge, Mass, verse 490 a and b, 1957. Plutarch's context is brotherhood and he writes, 'We must be careful, especially at such times to associate familiarly with our brother's friends, but avoid and shun all intimacy with their enemies, imitating in this point, at least, the practise of the Cretans, who, though they often quarelled with and warred against each other, made up their differences and united when outside enemies attacked; and this it was that they called syncretism.'

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closed ranks when an external enemy attacked.<sup>1</sup> Our first impression of syncretism should thus be its tensile nature. It is descriptive of the tensions that must exist between a united face and habitual discord. Over time, these tensions intensify and relax given certain factors. It is *very* interesting that unity is especially sought in times of crisis - when the 'external' attacks. We will consider this in more detail below.

Syncretism however remains a concept that serves many approaches. After Plutarch, subsequent Christian authors picked up the term and adopted it as a theological concept. Erasmus in particular uses the word in his *Adagia*, and *Epistolae* and 'syncretism' becomes a chance for doctrinal unity by mediating between different aspects of Christianity - a very 'in-house' term. It also starts to develop a bad odour, which allows commentators to say,

'Syncretism' is a contentious term, often taken to imply the 'unauthentic' or 'contamination', the infiltration of a supposedly 'pure' tradition by symbols and meanings seen as belonging to other, incompatible traditions.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, if we can say there is an antonym to syncretism it would be 'tradition' - the idea of a set of beliefs that are conceived of as 'pure'. Yet, 'pure tradition' is of course an impossible ideal. In some way all religions are continually influenced over time. It can be easily shown that some level of syncretism pervades all faith. It is perhaps the monotheistic traditions whose prophetic messages are concerned with the 'pure' word of God that have a special interest in denying the possibility of syncretism for example, Kraemer in 1937 argued that although all religions were to some extent syncretistic, he tries to immunize Christianity from this law by suggesting that the roots of syncretic development had little to do with monotheism. Baird, on the other hand, seizes on the all-pervasiveness of syncretism to argue that if it is everywhere then there is no need to identify it.<sup>3</sup> Berling deftly counters this argument by noting that all religious traditions should be analysed in terms of

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<sup>1</sup> Carsten Colpe, 'Syncretism', trans Matthew J. O'Connell in M. Eliade (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religions*, Chicago, 1985, Vol. 12, p. 218.

<sup>2</sup> Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart, 'Introduction: problematizing syncretism', in Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (eds), *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism*, London and New York, 1994, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> 'Since syncretism in its historical sense is universally applicable... its use in religico-historical inquiry should be abandoned', Baird, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

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'...*what* has or has not been borrowed or blended, and *what* has or has not influenced specific religious thinkers at specific points in history.'<sup>1</sup> This is the approach I have taken with the material presented below.

To get away from applications in both the Western theological sense and, as scholars have come to use the word, in a pejorative sense, it is understandable that a commentator such as Droogers would speak of dividing syncretism into two clearly defined approaches: the objective and the subjective. Droogers believes that objectively, syncretism '...refers neutrally and descriptively to the mixing of religions.'<sup>2</sup> Subjectively it is 'an evaluation'<sup>3</sup> of the mixing of religious traditions from inside a particular tradition. I will address this second issue below. However I doubt that such a clear demarcation as 'objective' and 'subjective' can be justified. This sort of demarcation is challenged by the fact that we all speak from inside particular traditions, religious or academic. Baird uses this inside/outside argument against the scholar who, he says, must inevitably miss the point,

Syncretism is a concept applied to a religion by those who stand outside its circle of faith and hence fail to see or experience its inner unity.<sup>4</sup>

As we noted above however, there are points in the development of a religion where syncretism is more intense and identifiable, and times when it is less obvious. Baird fails to recognise these shifts in his general condemnation of the word. It has been suggested by Kamstra that students looking at various textual sides of a religious tradition and isolating various influences, do not see the practicalities of a faith.<sup>5</sup> So the information gathered below relies specifically on religious pamphlets used in missionising activities and visits to Bahá'í and Caodaist communities. Furthermore I have addressed the insider/outsider debate elsewhere, concluding that indeed the student can know a great deal about the inside of a

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<sup>1</sup> Judith A. Berling, *The Syncretic Religion of Lin Chao-en*, New York, 1980, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> André Droogers, 'Syncretism: The Problem of Definition, the Definition of the Problem', in Jerald D. Gort *et al.* (eds), *Dialogue and Syncretism*, Grand Rapids, 1989, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> Baird, *op. cit.* p. 151,

<sup>5</sup> In Droogers, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

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syncretic faith such as Caodaism.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately Baird is suggesting that syncretism is not something a religion would want to describe itself as. 'The word syncretism is usually not used by a believer to describe his own religion.'<sup>2</sup> This statement is certainly not the case with Caodaism,<sup>3</sup> which at this stage in its religious development clearly wants to be seen as syncretic,

As a Great House of Faith, Caodaism combines the teachings of all the great religious traditions and opens before us the Great Way to paradise.<sup>4</sup>

The Bahá'í Faith is less eager to use the word but they are quick to claim lineage with all existing religious traditions. Just as Caodaism has a canonised set of immortals, prophets and scholars serving God, so too does the Bahá'í Faith. They recognise nine prophets in particular. These include: Abraham, Krishna, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, The Báb, and Bahá'u'lláh.<sup>5</sup>

I will now examine these two traditions to see how, in both text and practice, Caodaism and the Bahá'í Faith are informative on and can be understood by syncretism.

### **Formation/Conversion**

In the field of new religions development it is very rare to find something that has come from nothing. Tradition plays a vital role in providing new religions with the structures and the authority to grow. New ideas in new religions are just as rare, what we tend to find are traditional ideas rearranged and presented in new ways.

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Hartney, "'Open Temple, Open Mind" Viewing Caodaism,' *ARS Review* 2001, in press.

<sup>2</sup> Baird, *op cit*, p. 148.

<sup>3</sup> See Caodaist website: <http://www.caodai.net/eng/links.htm>, Sydney Centre for Caodaism *Introduction*, accessed 21 October 2000:

Before revealing Himself to found Caodaism which is the *syncretism* of the ancient doctrines, God sent the Great Spirits incarnate in the World to create various philosophical societies aimed at giving new life to human consciousness. Examples are the Theosophical Society, the Society for Research into Buddhist Philosophy, the Psychic Society, study of Spiritism, etc. Most of these societies were founded to teach the Truth to all the countries of the World, one century before the appearance of Caodaism (my emphasis).

<sup>4</sup> Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do, *op. cit.* no page refs.

<sup>5</sup> *The Bahá'ís*, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

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Clearly the revelatory aspects of the Bahá'í prophets depend greatly on the Judaic tradition of what it means to be a prophet and how this concept translates into Christianity and Islam. For the sake of its claim to universality, the Hindu god Krishna and the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, are also included in this 'prophetic' lineage, despite what Hindus, Buddhists and religious historians might think of such an epithet. Working in the opposite direction, for Caodaists, Jesus is included as one of the immortals and positioned on the third or saintly level of the five levels of spiritual attainment. In the Caodaist canon he represents the entire monotheistic tradition - including Judaism and Islam - despite the problems this may cause for Jews and Muslims trying to understand Caodaism. Here we touch on Berling's suggestion that the study of syncretism should be about *what* is brought together. In the case of the Bahá'í faith we might say that the inclusion of Krishna and Buddha helps promote the ideal of universality rather than attract Buddhists and Hindus into a new Persian faith. These figures sit so out of place in the prophetic machinery of this particular religion. Similarly there are many reasons why Jesus is included in the Caodaist canon. I have already suggested part of the reason could be the need to see the French and their Catholicism brought more fully into the religious life of Vietnam without invalidating that life as Catholic missionaries were trying to do. Within these brief examples we see at work what Shaw and Stewart refer to as '...the politics of religious synthesis.'<sup>1</sup> That is the negotiation that takes place between an ideal of universalism and the need to attract the widest possible audience for the fastest possible and most sustainable growth.

Syncretism helps to explain parts of the origins and the dramatic rise in numbers that has seen the survival and success of these new faiths. Surely the Babi organisation provided a solid, if at the time, directionless group that became an electorate from which the Bahá'í Faith could grow. Later it was able to attract Christians and Muslims and, most interestingly, a large number of Persian Zoroastrians as it went. This process and the reasons for it, can perhaps best be explained in light of recent research on Caodaism.

In an older sociological explanation Jane Susan Werner proposes that Caodaism flourished so dramatically because, '...peasants joined the Cao Dai for political and socio-economic reasons.'<sup>2</sup> and '...to be sheltered by a protective elite.'<sup>3</sup> For those who joined,

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<sup>1</sup> Shaw and Stewart, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Jane Susan Werner, *Peasant Politics and Religious Sectarianism: Peasant and Priest in the Cao Dai in Vietnam*, New Haven, 1981, pp. 56-57.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

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Caodaism represented a ‘...kind of cultural nationalism,’<sup>1</sup> that was a ‘...reaction to Westernisation,’<sup>2</sup> as well as a ‘...form of escapism.’<sup>3</sup> Some of these points are spot-on, some offensive, but regrettably, Werner fails to take serious account of the role that syncretism played in the recruitment process. One clear example is the development of Caodaist ritual. The rituals of the religion were initially carried out inside a Buddhist temple at *Go Ken* which instantly illustrates the links that must have been apparent to many early believers between Caodaism and Buddhism. Yet the rites themselves were very similar to those performed by semi-secret religio-political groups called *minh*. There were five major *minh* groups in Vietnam and, as Oliver writes,

The leaders of the Minh Duong and the Minh Tan became Caodai disciples and this resulted in the Minh Duong disbanding.... There was so much similarity between Caodaism and the ‘Minh’ groups in areas such as ritual and theology that some have mistakenly claimed that the Caodai deliberately took their theory, worship and ritual organization...<sup>4</sup>

As Blagov states, Caodaism ‘was built up and gathered dogmas as it gathered adherents.’<sup>5</sup> The question remains however, why were so many different groups eager to unite into something more significant when these smaller disunited groups had continued on their own for years, sometimes centuries? In my forthcoming thesis, I propose that French colonialism had forced on the Vietnamese an ‘explosion in consciousness’ where all the previous ideas of Vietnamese life and independence were severely challenged. It was a time of severe crisis. While the French were imposing hybrid institutions on Vietnam such as French-Vietnamese courts, colonial advisory councils and so forth, so too were new institutions being sought to deal with these changes by the Vietnamese. These were institutions which empowered the Vietnamese, if not politically (because of French repression) then spiritually. In their studies on syncretism Shaw and Stewart note,

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<sup>1</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> Oliver, *op. cit.*, p. 28

<sup>5</sup> Sergei Blagov, *The Cao Dai: A New Religious Movement*, Moscow, 1999, p. 17.

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It is significant that many recent studies of resistance through ritual have focused upon religious synthesis in contexts of colonialism and other forms of alien domination or exploitation, although they have not been explicitly about syncretism.<sup>1</sup>

Another facet of the fast growth of these religions was the way in which their syncretic approach blurred the issue of conversion. If Caodaism looked like Buddhism or a *Minh* organisation then surely this eased people's concerns about switching from one religion to another. In fact Caodaism continues to encourage members from any religion to worship in Caodai temples without leaving their initial faith.<sup>2</sup>

A similar situation seems to have been the case during the first eighty years of the Bahá'í faith. Smith writes,

[at the start] membership often tended to be inclusive in nature.... This situation only changed at the direction of Shoghi Effendi [Great-grandson of Bahá'u'lláh and guardian of the faith from 1921- 1957]... Accordingly, Bahá'ís are now forbidden to retain dual religious membership.<sup>3</sup>

Could it be that following the pattern of growth and development of the Bahá'í Faith, Caodaism will also turn more exclusivist in the years to come?

### **Why Different Messages/Contradictions**

In the transition to bring faiths together an obvious worry and possible point of criticism is how sometimes totally irreconcilable faith systems can be brought together. This is where the myth of globalisation becomes vital. The Bahá'ís explain the contradictions of faith in terms of 'differing needs' of people at particular historical periods.

Since there is one God, these Manifestations of God (i.e. chosen individuals such as prophets) have taught the same religious

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<sup>1</sup> Shaw and Stewart, *op. cit.*, p. 20

<sup>2</sup> It was interesting to meet a Caodaist in Louisiana who, although being born to Caodai parents, took advantage of Caodaism's openness on this issue to worship at a local Christian church. Many of his Christian co-religionists were censorious of such a lifestyle, the Caodaists unperturbed.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 43

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faith. They have developed and adapted it to meet the needs of people in each period of history.<sup>1</sup>

The underlying assumption is that these adaptations are no longer necessary. They also apply some free interpretation in order to find the universal in a number of traditions. One example, as we saw above, is the melding of the figures of Buddha and Krishna into a 'prophetic tradition' or a Christ into an 'immortal' tradition. Interestingly, when one Bahá'í was asked how two very Eastern figures such as Krishna and Buddha could be categorised as prophets, he replied that the centuries had corrupted Hinduism and Buddhism, otherwise they would fit more in more neatly with the details of Bahá'í revelation.<sup>2</sup> Corruption over time is also used as an explanation in Caodaism.

In Caodaism, the emphasis on globalism is even more acute. One message from heaven, quoted at the start of this paper, has it that,

Formerly people of the world lacked means of transportation, therefore they did not know each other...<sup>3</sup>

This lack of means of human communication led to a need for Duc Cao Dai (or God) to regionalise the messages. He communicated to various communities and nationalities. Now, however, globalisation ushers in both a world unity and an end-time. I will consider the Bahá'í and Caodaist end-times in more detail below.

### **Ranking**

A part of the syncretisation of all religions into one *über* faith is the way these two religions rank and order various older religions in their own potted macro-histories. In the Bahá'í faith, this 'age of past prophets' is referred to using the lineage of the nine prophets mentioned above. Each of them proclaimed the word of God during their particular periods over six thousand years. They did this in order to foreshadow the advent of the universal manifestation of Hussein's mission as 'Bahá'u'lláh' the glory of God. It is this macro-history that infers a hierarchy of traditions. Darwinian thought is appropriated to the extent that Bahá'í documents refer to

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<sup>1</sup> The Bahá'í House of Worship: *The Bahá'í Faith* pamphlet, Sydney, n/d.

<sup>2</sup> As explained in author's interview with Omid T, 10 December 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Caodai Overseas Missionary, *The Third Universal Amnesty of God*, Maryland, 1999, no page refs.

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the manifestation of prophets as ‘...fundamental to the evolutionary order itself’<sup>1</sup> and it enables a Bahá’í such as Tony Thomson to say ‘Judaism was given to a tribe, Christianity to a city and Bahá’í to the world.’<sup>2</sup>

Bahá’í macro-history also defines the importance of certain religious traditions over others, for example,

Various other figures of religious history are explicitly excluded from the list of Manifestations and are instead regarded as moral reformers and sages (Confucius) or as minor prophets who are divinely inspired but not the bearers of an independent divine revelation (the prophets of Israel).<sup>3</sup>

After its appearance, Caodaism developed a very complex ranking system in which all religions of the world were seen to relate to five general branches. That is, the way of humanity, geniism, the way of the saints, the way of the immortals and the way of the buddhas. Confucius as the central figure of the ‘way of humanity’ here receives the same position as in the Bahá’í faith: as a moral ethical system Confucianism (Ru Jia) is regarded as central to the Caodaist’s pursuit but nevertheless relegated to the bottom of the religious pyramid. The Buddha sits atop this pyramid representing the height of the spiritual pursuit, Jesus half-way between the two.

### **The Future and its promise of Tolerance**

Both religions share many millenarian aspects. The sustained growth of the Bahá’í faith leads many members to suspect that something big is happening. One member said, ‘I feel that we are in the lesser peace and that the greater peace will soon appear.’<sup>4</sup> With Caodaism the expectation of change is much harder to perceive, nevertheless the opening of the ‘Third Period’ of world religious development took place in 1926. Of Bahá’í chronology, MacEoin writes,

Baha’ Allah is regarded as the promised saviour of all ages and religions, the ‘universal manifestation’ of the divinity, who

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<sup>1</sup> *The Bahá’ís, op cit*, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Author’s Interview with Tony Thomson at the Bahá’í Temple Mona Vale NSW, 24 April 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Smith, *The Bahai Religion*, Oxford, 1988, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Bahá’í member, 30 May, 1999.

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presides over the present universal cycle. His dispensation will last at least one thousand years, and the Baha'i cycle about five hundred thousand. It is anticipated that, before the end of this dispensation, the Bahá'í religion will become the dominant faith of the planet, uniting the nations in a single theocratic system based on the religious and political teaching of Baha'Allah and his successors.<sup>1</sup>

It is during this period of one thousand years where no valid new religious activity can take place outside the Bahá'í Faith. Any new religious manifestation during this time is to be considered as one believer said, '...false.'<sup>2</sup> After this one thousand year period, which started in 1892, there will continue to be over the next five hundred thousand years an indefinite number of revelations in what will be the Golden Age.

In Caodaism revelation via *séance* leaves this faith less dependent upon individual prophets. Here, the possibility of ongoing revelation through seance is not perceived as a threat or 'false'. For Caodaists the religions of the world can be categorised into three distinct periods: the Age of Hinduism and Judaism (Moses) marks the First Amnesty; the Axial Age, with the religious developments of Buddha, Confucius and Christ marks the Second; and the advent of Caodaism in 1926 is the commencement of the Third. Caodaism is the greatest expression of religious activity during this period and will usher in a Golden Age. The cycle will take seven hundred thousand years.<sup>3</sup> It proves itself a fascinating example of a religious system deeply enmeshed in the concerns of syncretism. When *séance* is allowed once more (currently it is prohibited by the communists) will it continue to furnish revelation? Or will its current system of teachings be canonised/concretised in the way that the Baha'i canon seems to have been set for the next thousand years? What is fascinating is that this concretising of doctrine and canon - the *what* of Berling's question - appears to be a natural part of the syncretic process. On the one hand, syncretism provides an entry point for followers of other traditions at a crisis time when unity is sought, but on the other hand, ongoing syncretic developments would make a religion far less stable. If Caodaism continues,

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<sup>1</sup> Denis MacEoin, 'Baha'ism', in *A Handbook of Living Religions*, John Hinnells (ed.), Harmondsworth, 1991, p. 479.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Bahá'í member, Sydney Bahai Temple, Mona Vale, 30 May 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Mr Nguyen Chanh Giao, Community Leader Caodaist Association of New South Wales, 22 April 1999.

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through séance to draw other newer religious faiths into its system rather than canonise what has already been revealed, then this will provide a brazenly new form of ongoing syncretic activity.

Of course, Caodaism's continuing syncretic adventure could make its doctrine so unwieldy that the faith becomes little more than an excuse for comparative religion classes by ritual. Like the Bahá'í faith, Caodaism's Third Amnesty uses the unity of all religions and the process of syncretism to shore up its claims to universality in a global world. Perhaps this is what globalisation ultimately means... taking on board the faiths of the world into one *über*-faith, mixing the ingredients to suit the various temperaments of the times. It is thus sad to note that in Bahá'í eyes Caodaism, though sharing many similarities with it, would not be considered a valid religious expression because it has been made manifest after the start of the thousand year dispensation.

### **Beyond Crete**

These religions call for unity - and in so doing look (to use a very Christian term) 'ecumenical'. They appeal to potential members as being significantly different from older faiths because they are both unifying and tolerant. Yet to achieve this, both faiths establish a whole new set of problems in the field of pluralism and inter-religious tolerance. By different means these faiths are still ranking the religious life of the world just as other, older traditions have. They still emplace other religions by suggesting that belief systems such as Christianity were part of an inevitable process of evolution and that the new faiths, rather than any other faith, represent the more advanced system. It is both a timely spiritual response to globalism, but also more of the same in terms of how faiths struggle to claim universality. By daring to use this suspect word 'syncretism' we can see how processes of syncretism may indeed lead to the end of religions.

These two religions, despite prophecies and spirit messages, were clearly effected by other cultural influences present at the time including ideas from many religious traditions. What is certainly different about these two new religions is the information available regarding the details of world faiths. These details were able to seep into the mechanisms of these religions as they developed. In fact the existence of these details required that some form of ideal ordering system be established to rank, that is, put into place, other faith systems. If a syncretism of sorts has always been in evidence as Baird suggests, then in looking at these two faiths, are we in fact

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glimpsing the start of all religions? Certainly a religion like Christianity was part Judaism, part Zoroastrianism, perhaps even part Gnosticism. Its syncretic potential was limited to the then 'known' world. Perhaps the testaments make reference to other religions in ways that we can no longer chart. Certainly we can say that these more recent syncretic trends are influenced by globalisation, colonialisation, and the mixing of world cultures. One which requires a ritual and textual space where cultures can meet. This is certainly the reason why religious activity has been so strong, in areas such as Persia and Vietnam. Ultimately syncretism is a process of bringing together traditions to make sense of, and to ensure the survival of, a new religion as a sacral reference point. That tradition, once established, may continue at various points to develop its syncretic mechanisms, but most probably at a particular stage as its doctrine and theology stabilise influences on the religion will diminish. After the syncretic period, traditions tend towards canonisation rather than remaining open to ongoing religious development. This is now the case with the Bahá'í Faith and its predicted thousand years of doctrinal stability. Perhaps things will be different with Caodaism.

I hope this paper has explained why syncretism is more likely to be linked to new religious developments, or to religions going through periods of crisis. Furthermore syncretism is often associated with or used to ameliorate millenarian hopes. It has been linked to the development of a macro-history that idealises particular religious histories of the world. What I would dare say is that syncretism is more a developmental stage that all religions pass through. The reality of globalisation and the myths we draw from it, have now altered this developmental stage. Thus one new path to the claim of universality, as we should see in future new religions, lies in the proclamation of the end of religion/s.