

Vietnamese Syncretism and the Characteristics of Caodaism's Chief Deity: Problematizing Đức Cao Đài as a 'Monotheistic' God Within an East Asian Heavenly Milieu

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JDTREA 2022, 1(2): 41-59

Original Articles

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Journal of Daesoon Thought and the Religions of East Asia Vol. 1. Issue 2 (March 2022): 41–59
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<https://doi.org/10.25050/JDTREA.2022.1.2.41>

Day of submission: 2021. 10. 25.

Completion of review: 2022. 02. 15.

Final decision for acceptance: 2022. 03. 20.

P-ISSN: 2799-3949

E-ISSN: 2799-4252

Abstract

Caodaism is a new religion from Vietnam which began in late 1925 and spread rapidly across the French colony of Indochina. With a broad syncretic aim, the new faith sought to revivify Vietnamese religious traditions whilst also incorporating religious, literary, and spiritist influences from France. Like Catholicism, Caodaism kept a strong focus on its monotheistic nature and today Caodaists are eager to label their religion a monotheism. It will be argued here, however, that the syncretic nature of this new faith complicates this claim to a significant degree. To make this argument, we will consider here the nature of God in Caodaism through two central texts from two important stages in the life of the religion. The first is the canonized *Compilation of Divine Messages* which collects a range of spirit messages from God and some other divine voices. These were received in the early years of the faith. The second is a collection of sermons from 1948/9 that takes Caodaist believers on a tour of heaven, and which is entitled *The Divine Path to Eternal Life*. It will be shown that in the first text, God speaks in the mode of a fully omnipotent and omniscient supreme being. In the second text, however, we are given a view of paradise that is much more akin to the court of a Jade Emperor within an East Asian milieu. In these realms, the personalities of other beings and redemptive mechanisms claim much of our attention, and seem to be a competing center of power to that of God. Furthermore, God's consort, the *Divine Mother*, takes on a range of sacred creative prerogatives that do something similar. Additionally, cadres of celestial administrators; buddhas, immortals, and saints help with the operation of a cosmos which spins on with guidance from its own laws. These laws form sacred mechanisms, such as cycles of reincarnation and judgement. These operate not in the purview of God, but as part of the very nature of the cosmos itself. In this context, the dualistic, polytheistic, and even automatic nature of Caodaism's cosmos will be considered in terms of the way in which they complicate this religion's monotheistic claims. To conclude, this article seeks to demonstrate the precise relevance of the term 'monotheism' for this religion.

Keywords: Vietnam; Caodaism; Spiritism; Syncretism; Heaven; Monotheism; Nature of God; Indochina; New Religion; Divine Mother.

Members of the Vietnamese religion of Caodaism will report that their religion is a monotheism. This claim, whilst being genuinely made, can also be easily misinterpreted by Westerners who bring a Judeo-Christian understanding of monotheism to their comprehension of such a category. Caodaists are nevertheless happy to accommodate Westerners in this thinking, and as we will see, in direct séance communications the God of this religion (Đức Cao Đài) identifies also as the God of the Hebrew and Christian Testaments. Yet it is as “Jade Emperor” in a traditional East Asian concept of a supreme deity that the Caodaist God is best understood. As a result of this East-West complexity, the present article lays out for the first-time key aspects of the theological sophistication behind the names, personality, descriptions, and conceptualisations of ‘God’ that this faith system of millions deploys. I seek here to precisely denominate the nature of Caodaism’s God and its idea of monotheism - ‘conditional’ though this may be. Historical developments will enable us to understand a significant part of the picture. The following investigation will also chart the development of the Caodaist idea of God from the start of the religion in 1925 through to the year of this faith’s greatest cultural and political influence: 1955.¹ To achieve this, I will base my examination on two sets of texts, one of which has been recently translated by myself and my colleagues. The first, *The Thánh Ngôn Hiệp Tuyển*, is a collection of divine messages from the opening years of the faith (Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ 1968). In these messages, God speaks to the founders of the faith and, as he does so, he gives some hints as to his nature, personality, and his planned objectives. I will then compare themes in this text to a work from 1949 entitled *Con Đường Thiêng-Liêng Hằng-Sống or The Divine Path to Eternal Life* (Hartney 2022). This is a series of 35 highly visual sermons by Phạm Công Tắc, the religion’s most impactful leader. In this work, he shows his co-religionists the palaces, offices and functions of heaven to better help them in their quest for salvation. Through these descriptions we receive a fuller understanding of the Caodaist God, his role, and we even have his appearance described to us. Both these texts allow us to chart the names of God used over this period by the religion and what theological concerns they demarcate. This will permit an assessment of the tensions that link a Western assumption of monotheism and a dualistic or polytheistic “imperial model” of heaven. This research will conclude with a consideration of how these tensions are negotiated and maintained by the leaders and believers of this new faith.²

Category Confusions

In this article, I will be using the term “God” (with a capital) to refer to a supreme, male monotheistic deity. Although Caodaists use this word in translations into English and when speaking with anglophones, their own range of words for the supreme deity are far more subtle and extensive and we will discuss these below. The foundational

complexity of these interchangeable terms for the ultimate divine force derives, I suggest, from the bilingualism and biculturalism of the founders of the faith. Those who drove the religion in its early years were native Vietnamese speakers who had been trained across their school age years by the French to populate the colonial administration of Indochina as French-speaking bureaucrats. In the colonist's language, terms such as *Dieu* and *Jésus-Christ* (from Catholicism) would have become as familiar to the founders of Caodaism as non-Catholic, deist, republican/secular and possibly Masonic terms such as *l'Être Suprême*. French influences on the founders of Caodaism came potently through the curriculum they studied and by their consumption of French religious texts and literature. In this way their ideas of "God" were reinforced by their enjoyment of French novelists and poets such as Victor Hugo (Hartney 2004b) or the writings of spiritualists popular in France such as Flammarion (1874) and Kardec (2007). What connects each of these terms is a supreme deity whose existence precedes the cosmos and its making. He creates a universe *de novo*. He acts singularly without a consort, has no court of cosmic administrators, and is invested with the unqualified talents of omniscience and omnipotence. In the Christian instance, according to the *Gospel of John* and in the form of Jesus, he will come to end time itself and to judge the world. Creation *de novo* then remains the main theme whether it is the deity of Genesis, the Great Architect of the Masons, or the "prime mover" of those deists of the French Enlightenment such as Voltaire who had an ongoing influence on French culture (Hartney 2006). World judgement and the right to end time when he so choses are secondary prerogatives based on his Christian manifestation.

In competition with this Western ideal of God, we have an East Asian ideal that extends out from traditional ideas of Chinese kingship and the official declaration of the cult of the Jade Emperor (玉皇大帝/Yu Huang Da Di) made official by imperial edict during the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE) (Ching 1997). The heavenly court and its celestial ruler develop in Vietnam from what Woodside names "the Chinese model" – that is, heaven operates like a traditional imperial court; it has an emperor (God), his consort (a Divine Mother) and rank upon rank of divine bureaucrats (Woodside 1988). In Caodaism, these heavenly bureaucrats are drawn from the Ngũ chi Đại Đạo or five branches of the faith: 1. Buddhas; 2. Immortals; 3. Saints; 4. Local Geniis; and 5. Humanity. Each of these ranks relate to a particular religious tradition that helps constitute Caodaism's syncretic outlook. The heavenly bureaucracy stretches from those souls enlightened through Buddhism (1), Daoism (2), Christianity (3), Folk Religion (4) and on to those souls made sagely through humanist Confucianism (5). As these elevated souls assist in the administration of the cosmos, so then does this Eastern ideal of God-as-Emperor rest not on his singular power to do all things but on his command of the spiritual court. Whilst Caodaist texts do indeed stress God's omnipotence and omniscience, these qualities are occluded to some degree by the vast range of assistance he receives in operating the various offices, ministries, and courts of heaven.

It is this aspect of God that we will concentrate on in the following research. Here creation of the world *de novo* is a passing feature of God's actions but not a constant theme, a central quality or, as we will see, a purely original act. Instead, these are contested qualities for the cosmos and its mechanisms of reincarnation and salvation sometimes seem to precede him. We face here an idea of God that develops from influences drawn from Vietnamese folk-religion, as well as Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist ideals. God is referred to in Caodaism as a "great immortal" and as a "bodhisattva" (his most formal title being *Cao Đài Tiên Ông Đại Bồ Tát Ma Ha Tát* – literally "High Tower, Ancient Immortal, Great Bodhisattva"). The inference of titles such as these is that he is the preeminent soul in the cosmos. This is backgrounded, however, with the assumption of an Indian/Buddhist concept of existence where the universe itself is a mechanism without end, uncreated and perpetuated by rising and falling ages, *karma*, and *samsara*. Which is to say in some descriptions of God it is assumed that the cosmos *precedes*, is contemporaneous, or functions independently alongside this supreme deity. In all this, Caodaist concepts of time seem to be only discretely linear. In their view, the universe is approaching a significant change of tone as we reach the dawn of a new age – an age marked by the appearance of Caodaism itself (the official name of the religion is: *Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ*, or "Great Religion for the Third Period of Salvation"). This new age, however, is one age out of four great time periods that constantly rotate. Caodaism's cosmic outlook may include a creation story, but it is predominantly based on a cyclical time scheme (Phạm Công Tắc 1949, Sermon Nine) not a linear one.

This theme of cosmic precedence can be found in some other examples. With reference to Vietnamese folk religion, we can turn to an early poetic text by Phạm Công Tắc, which is not a canonised Caodaist text, but illustrates this man's religious imaginium during the years when the faith was being formed. In this influential work, *A Visit to Celestial Realms* (c.1927), the *Bát Quái Đài* (or central tower of heaven) is depicted being under the control of the (male) god of lightning (*Lôi Công*) and his (female) thunder consort (*Kim Quang Điện Mẫu*). In this poem cycle, much of what feeds into Caodaist concepts of heaven as the faith develops, God is not depicted as great creator but is connected instead to the frightening meteorological phenomenon of lightening in a folk-religion context. Similarly, to add to this a Daoist example. we see occasionally see reference in the religion to *Nguyên Thủy Thiên Tôn* (元始天尊) (Hartney 2022, Sermon Four). This figure is understood as a primordial high deity who predates the Jade Emperor – the god before God. In this example we touch again on a heaven where it is possible that the present God of heaven is not necessarily the primordial or originating god of the cosmos. What these examples demonstrate is that while being depicted as a monotheistic creator God, Caodaism's view of *Đức Cao Đài* still deploys a multi-vocality in its overall concept of the nature of God. It is both

Western and Eastern. It is a concept which borrows not only from Catholicism, Deism, and Masonry, but also Folk Religion concepts of God as the deity of thunder and works with Buddhist and Daoist ideas of a deity that exists not as preceding a created cosmos but as a supreme force that works within that creation. There are theological and soteriological ramifications that arise from this multi-vocality. This will be the focus of the rest of this article.

Methodology: Text Analysis – But Which Texts?

I have outlined elsewhere a four-stage model of text development in Caodaism (Hartney 2022). There is a formative stage of social poetry composition and drinking amongst friends in Saigon that we see evolve during 1925 towards spiritism and message reception.³ This group then begins to experiment with the Western tradition of *séance* as the year proceeds. By September, this group of friends are now receiving messages from local spirits and the voices of recently dead family members. This is mainly through table-tipping. Later, a “beaked basket” will be deployed – this is a woven basket held by several mediums that has an arm and a stylus extending from it for the transference of heavenly writing. In these message reception events, a pseudonymous voice called “A-Ă-Â” (the first three vowels of the Romanised system for Vietnamese speech) assists the group to establish a welcoming banquet for The Divine Mother as the nation celebrates the Autumn Moon festival (中秋節/Tết Trung Thu) of that year. As I will explain below, the appearance of the Divine Mother as the first deity manifestation in Caodaism is significant. She has a range of creative duties that can potentially limit the “supreme creator” status of Caodaism’s God and we will see how this is managed below.

On December 24, Christmas Eve, A-Ă-Â returns to declare that he is the God of Moses and, as Jesus, of the Christians (Hartney 2017). This event is taken as the official commencement of the religion of Caodaism. What follows is a series of group-*séance* messages as God, now using now other pseudonyms (such as Đức Cao Đài “Venerable High Tower”) or titles (Đức Chí Tôn “Venerable Supreme Being”), instructs his followers further in the establishment of the new religion. These messages are collated as the *Thánh Ngôn Hiệp Tuyển* (Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ 1968). Over the next decade, group *séance* is further deployed to convey or confirm a range of other canonical texts that confirm the governance structure and principals of the new faith. *Séance* at this time is also a dramatic performance that helps bring tens of thousands of converts into the new religion. From the poetry compositions of 1925 through to the limiting of group *séance* activity in 1934 we have the first period of text development in Caodaism. From this period, it is the *Thánh Ngôn Hiệp Tuyển* that gives us the clearest hints to the nature of God during this formative stage.

The second period of text development begins in 1934. As a result of a number of battles over authority during this year, Phạm Công Tắc (1890–1959) emerges as the pre-eminent authority in the religion and re-emphasises his claim to be Caodaism's chief medium. Group séance takes on a much less significant role and Phạm Công Tắc's ability to commune directly with heaven gives us a new tone in the religion's connection to the spirit world. This is the second stage of scriptural development. It lasts until the start of his period of exile in 1955. The scriptural focus is now on the inspired sermon. World War II is a major interrupter of this period, and it is not until the later 1940s, that sermon delivery becomes a significant part of the evolving dynamics of Caodaist theology. It is from this period that Phạm Công Tắc uses a series of sermons to visit and describe heaven. These have been collected in the book *Con Đường Thiêng-Liêng Hằng-Sống* (1948–1949) or *The Divine Path to Eternal Life* (Phạm Công Tắc 1949; Hartney 2022). A careful comparison of these two texts will form the methodological spine of this study.

The Divine Mother and How She “Constrains” The Creative Power of God

It is noteworthy that Đức Phật Mẫu or the Divine Mother is the first deity to manifest in the months leading up to the foundation of the religion. In part she develops from the personality of Tây Vương Mẫu (西王母) or Queen Mother of the West – a substantial divine ancestor figure-cum-supreme-deity that has been a part of the East Asian religious landscape for at least 3000 years (Hartney, n.d.). Her additional titles in the religion are Vô Sanh Lão Mẫu (無生老母) and Vô Sanh Phật-Mẫu (無生佛母), translatable as “not-born Elder/Buddha Mother.” These emphasise her primordial and uncreated nature. And we see her addressed in Caodaist funeral prayers as Cửu Thiên Huyền Nữ (九天玄女) as Sacred Woman of the Nine Heavens – suggesting she has sovereignty over the totality of the afterworld. It seems then, that she is a major creative force in her own right.

When she is addressed in Caodaism as Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu (瑤池金母) we have another insight into her creative powers. This idea of her develops in Caodaism from White Lotus movements that arose in China during the nineteenth century. In these belief systems (which located themselves into Vietnam as elsewhere in East Asia) the Divine Mother has two important manifestations. The first is by her connection to the “diêu trì” or Nacre or Jade Lake. This connection to a body of water, sometimes also likened to a golden basin (*Kim Bân*), is the device she uses to create new souls. In this way, her characteristic as “mother of all” is stressed. Additionally, she is seen, often in connection with her son Maitreya Buddha as the one who has ushered in the next age of human salvation:

[I]n desperation [at the state of the world], the Mother emptied the heavens, ordering all the gods and saints to descend to communicate anew the moral and religious teachings that had been lost. This was a new dispensation, the last chance for human beings to change their ways and for society to reform (Jordan and Overmyer, 2016, 17).

It is then easy for Caodaists, as with folk-religious groups that preceded Caodaism in Vietnam, to see in this mother figure the following qualities: (1) that she exists before or for as long as the cosmos; (2) that she is the creator of souls and also human souls; and, (3) she is the reason the new age of salvation (and with it, Caodaism) has come to be through her emptying of the heavens and sending enlightened beings back down to earth through reincarnation to teach and elevate (those in the Caodaist hierarchy are considered elevated souls in this way). Suddenly Caodaism looks less like a monotheism and increasingly like a dualism.

What is interesting, however, is that the Divine Mother, quickly moves into obscurity in the first years of the religion once A-Ấ-Ấ reveals himself as Đức Cao Đài – the religion’s monotheistic God. The focus shifts quickly to communications with him. The few messages the Divine Mother sends through séance are patchy and have been mostly overlooked (Quách Minh Chương n.d.). It is only during 1930s and 1940s that her popularity as a worshipped being rises and a temporary space is found for her veneration. I have charted this slower rise in popularity of this deity in my explanation of the development of the Sydney Phật Mẫu temple which opened in 2019 (Hartney 2019).

It is only in the 1949 text that we examine here (*The Divine Path to Eternal Life*) where Phạm Công Tắc has the opportunity to most fully explain the relation of the Divine Mother to Đức Cao Đài. In his words, she retains all of her impressive creative abilities and central place in heaven but, as we will see from our examination of the following Caodaist creation story, it is Đức Cao Đài who precedes her during the religion’s creation event. He then bestows on her the mandate to exercise her immense creative powers. In this way, the tension between various folk traditions who held the Divine Mother as supreme (and which fed into Caodaism’s nascent syncretism) and the idea of God as both the Jade Emperor and the (partnerless) God of Western monotheisms is somewhat resolved.

God in The Divine Messages

Here is not the place to discuss at length the social phenomenon and literary operation of séance in Caodaism, but I am presently planning an exegesis on this process. Rather here it helps the argument of this research to examine a series of séances where, from 1925 through to 1928 the voice of Đức Cao Đài was made manifest.

The messages of this period were gathered and canonised in the sacred text entitled *The Thánh Ngôn Hiệp Tuyển*. They give us some insight into the nature of God through the presentation of his monotheistic voice. I have made a commentary on the major themes of these messages in other research (Hartney 2017). What I wish to do here is explain some of the subtle ways in which God delineates his own nature. In the first message of the collection, we read him saying:

Celebrate! This day, the 24th of December is the anniversary of my arrival in Europe to spread the Way. Your presence here brings me delight. Blessings will be upon this house. You must ready yourselves to receive my teachings. There will be more remarkable events to convince you (Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ 1968).

Here the alignment of Đức Cao Đài with the Western God is one of the first things he stresses along with the promise of the veracity of his message through the remarkable events that will follow. Thus we have the foreshadowing of a highly interventionist God sending remarkable events to validate his voice. We find this intervention powerful in the overwhelming detail it gives concerning the development of the new faith. He tells his listeners how to more efficiently conduct séance messages, he describes how altars and ritual spaces should be set up correctly for his worship, and appoints numerous listeners to positions in the hierarchy he creates. Through these early messages, he begins to form the institutions and rules of the new religion.

Throughout these texts he maintains that his motivation is the salvation of all souls and he encourages his listeners to act with the highest integrity to avoid bad karma themselves and set a significant example to the world. In messages such as that of the 24 April 1926 we get a more modern insight into this motivation:

Formerly, people lacked transportation and therefore did not know each other, I then founded at different epochs and in different areas, five branches of the Great Way: Confucianism, Shintoism, Christianity, Taoism and Buddhism, each based on the customs of the [local] races.

In present days, transportation has been improved, and people have come to know each other. But people do not always live in harmony because of the very multiplicity of those religions. That is why I have decided to unite all those religions into one to bring them to the primordial unity.

Modernity and globalism become a significant reason for why the new religion was founded and the God of these messages speaks through the modern technology of

divine communication (i.e., group séance). His voice is commanding yet becomes a familiar voice. He jokes with certain individuals, and directly admonishes others by name. Throughout the matter of the messages, he rarely focuses on explanations of his nature, but his voice remains certain and is always encouraging. We see this clearly in the message of 5 March 1927:

I always want you to get together to open the worthy path, to love and help each other, to share your joy and your sufferings, and do this while guiding humanity. If because of secular ambition, you become divided, hating and fighting each other, you would make poor examples to future generations, and the great way would therefore be pre-condemned. Paying attention to my words would be a significantly sincere and respectful gift to me. I bless you all. (Ascension.)

Although other heavenly voices appear in this collection, the tone of the messages from Đức Cao Đài remain fatherly, authoritative, and from this tone, we may say, his voice accords with a deity that is, if not *technically* monotheistic in a strict Western definition, then certainly it is the voice of one who is in command of all things.

Đức Cao Đài as Creator of the Universe

Having examined this early series of texts that *imply* characteristics about Đức Cao Đài from his own voice, we can now move to non-spiritist texts in the religion where the voice of religious leaders such as Phạm Công Tắc predominate. The most important early text about the nature of God is a dharma talk given in 1928. It seeks to explain Caodaist cosmogeny.

There had been nothing before the creation. Then the two masses of air called Hư Vô Chi Khí [which relate to the concept of Wu wei (無爲) or void] came from nowhere and smashed into each other. God's soul was formed from this, and his throne, which is called Thái Cực [太極 - or Supreme Ultimate] also came to exist. The fiery globe called Thái Cực, which is the mechanism of the material, divided itself under God's orders into the Lưỡng/Nghi [or yin/yang]... (Phạm Công Tắc 1928).

This passage seeks to demonstrate how Đức Cao Đài came into existence from the clashing winds of the void. It is not clear, however, if these winds are a part of him, or precede him, nor is it clear if the void or space of creation exists before God. What is interesting is that the creation story includes the creation, also, of God. The sermon

goes on to posit that Thái Cực's first duty is to separate out the male and the female. Only when this is done can life develop as a gendered yin/yang syzygy. Đức Cao Đài becomes the male aspect and his co-equal becomes Phật Mẫu or the Divine Mother. She represents the yin aspect of all creation. This is emphasised twenty-one years later in Sermon Twenty of the *Divine Path* where Phạm Công Tắc explains:

In the beginning, when the Supreme Being decided to divide his tánh (nature) using khí (qi; energy), he used his mystical dharma to create and develop the Divine Mother. The Divine Mother belongs to the yin, the Supreme Being belongs to the yang. When the yin and the yang are united together, they beget lives and grow the universe.

We might make a comparison between these origin concepts and the creation ideal we find in the *Dao De Jing*:

道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。萬物負陰而抱陽，沖氣以為和。

The Dao (the Way) gave birth to the One, this One gave birth to the Two, the Two birthed the Three, the Three generated all things. All things leave behind them an obscurity, and go forward to embrace the brightness, while they are harmonised by the breath of emptiness.

The “dao” itself is Đức Cao Đài but his originating force is Thái Cực. When this divides he remains as the yang constituent. It is then from this position of almost co-equality that both male and female aspects of divinity precede. Although in Caodaism Thái Cực is considered primary (yet also analogous to Đức Cao Đài and not the Divine Mother) we might say that labelling this religion *both* monotheistic and dualistic is justified because of the implied co-equality of the originating couple. Nevertheless, claims of dualism are rarely made by Caodaists or commentators on the religion. Despite the very high primordial status of the Divine Mother, Caodaists claim their faith is a monotheism ruled by a male deity. And it is to this deity, they argue, that dispensations of salvation have been offered across human history. Although this idea of salvation can be more closely connected, via some of the religions that precede Caodaism, to the care, concern, and centrality of the mother goddess.

An Extraordinary ‘Monotheism’: God and The Divine Path to Eternal Life 1949

Now we come to our final consideration and that is the manner in which God is

described and understood in the collection of sermons known as *The Divine Path to Eternal Life*. This text takes on the atmosphere of a collective shamanic journey into the heavens as Phạm Công Tắc describes in affective poetic imagery to his audience the multiple palaces, offices of heaven, personalities, pathways and the mechanisms that allow the cosmos to be administered and which allow souls to be saved or damned. The role of these sermons is to make a visual summary of a wide range of Caodaist beliefs and how they operate together. As such, this text allows us to collate a number of features, the first being an overview of the names used to describe God.

The range of referents for God extend through this text. And we might rank them from the most formal through to the more familiar.

1. Cao Đài Tiên Ông Đại Bồ Tát Ma Ha Tát – lit. High Tower, Ancient Immortal, Great Bodhisattva (most formal title). This name relies on two characters (高臺/Cao Đài) that are nothing more than a pseudonym for God. They can be translated as “high tower” and refer to a dwelling place of the supreme deity, but give little away. The additional appellations of “ancient immortal” and “great bodhisattva” suggest divinity, but not necessarily supreme divinity nor monotheistic divinity in a Western sense.
2. Ngọc Hoàng Thượng Đế (玉皇上帝) – Jade Emperor – a Chinese folk appellation given in Vietnamese form that Caodaists often use.
3. Đức Cao Đài (高臺) – Venerable High Tower – a *shortened* form of 1 “Đức” being here an honorific translatable as “venerable.”
4. Đức Chí Tôn (至尊) – Venerable Supreme Being, a term possibly transposed from the French *l'Être supreme* and its associations with moves to spiritualise the nascent French republic in 1794.
5. Đại Thiên Tôn (大天尊) – (lit. Honourable Great Heaven) – used in *The Divine Path* only when Phạm Công Tắc draws close to God. He uses this name only in relation to the Huỳnh Kim Khuyết or Golden Gate that leads to the Council of Heaven (Sermons Twenty-Five and Twenty-Seven).
6. Cha & Thầy – Father and Master [most likely to be used informally in personal prayer by Caodaists].

As we can see from these terms, pseudonyms are often used to point towards God. Upwardness, highness, and supremacy are referred to, but God’s titles rather than any particular noun of character, personality or specific name are deployed. As this sermon series reaches its climax, we do get a tangible vision of God. In Sermon Thirty-Five, Phạm Công Tắc gives us the following view of the supreme deity as a man with a white beard, dressed in a simple white robe. He continues:

He looked directly at me, seeming to be asking me to just look. When I looked up to him, I saw the nimbus illuminate his head and he held a stick that was incredibly beautiful. A gourd was attached to the end of the stick and he carried a bag at the side of his body. He was wearing the Jade Emperor's robe. He held his stick, which became the balance beam. He pulled the gourd and it became the tray of a set of scales. Then he pulled at his bag and it became the weights of the scale. These three precious objects united and became the spiritual scale. . . . It no longer seems strange; the being before us is also our great and merciful father who is constantly transforming as he creates the universe.

This holding of scales may seem a very monotheistic act – God is presented here as judge – weighing up the spiritual accounts of believers. Yet this quality of God-as-judge (essential to monotheistic if not deist concerns in the West) is downplayed throughout the sermons. In fact, in Sermon Twenty-Six, we read that

The politics of the universe is different from that of the earthly world in only one point: individuals control themselves. The infinite mystery of the Supreme Being is his heavenly court, which determines the movements and events of the universe. It has no value when everyone takes the opportunity of governing themselves. The political system will become stable and strong because each soul has the right to govern themselves. Nothing can challenge this divine method. When we can see the system of government as stable, then the whole spirit of the universe is united so we can govern ourselves.

Phạm Công Tắc explains in one section that we may call on God for help in seeking to increase our karmic account, but throughout these sermons, God is presented not as a judger, punisher, or rewarder. In considering why some souls proceed into the depths of the heavenly bureaucracy or are elevated to the lotus thrones of enlightenment while others are ejected, we look in *The Divine Path* to a range of mechanisms by which each soul is able to pass judgement on itself. Perhaps it is these mechanisms of personal examination that reduces God in Caodaism from an all-powerful God of judgement (as we see him in the West) to the maintainer of certain laws and functions of karmic balance that are inherent in the nature of existence itself. As we read through *the Divine Path* we see that these mechanisms include:

1. Eight Bridges of Light that lead into the Bát Quái Đài (or central palace of heaven). Any one of these bridges could let a believer drop into the Sea of Suffering below if their karmic merit was not of a particular standard (Sermon Three).

2. The Minh Cảnh is a mirror, or reflective realm in which the believer can see the good and evil that he/she has done – enabling them to judge themselves through visual review (Sermon Four).
3. The Vô Tự Kinh – or the book of no words - a record of the good and bad that we have done and yet another device that can prompt self-judgement. (Sermon Twenty-four)
4. The Thiên Thư or the “Divine Record” or “Celestial Rules” which are used to record what we have done in previous lives (Sermon Twenty-three).
5. The Kim Câu. This is a Golden Staff held by the buddha, Phục Linh Tánh Phật. As this buddha waves his staff, the former lives of a soul are revealed and the soul is able to see their karmic account by this method (Sermon Twenty-Five).
6. Although not a specific device of judgement, in Sermon Nine we read of how Caodaism looks forward to a great meeting of souls from the last age. This is the Đại Hội Long Hoa or Dragon Flower Assembly. Here advanced souls will pass or fail in their attempts to achieve a spiritual position. This great meeting is instigated by the Divine Mother and overseen by her son Maitreya Buddha. (In Sermon Nine this meeting is explained in relation to Caodaist microhistory and in Sermon Thirty-Five, *The Divine Path* concludes with the narrator, Phạm Công Tắc, foreseeing how he will take his lotus throne at this meeting).

What we might say here is that the otherworld operates by mechanisms that leaves God’s mercy and intervention mostly out of the picture. When a great judgement event is depicted, it is connected to the millenarian qualities of Maitreya Buddha and his potential as the great Buddha of the coming age, not to God. Where personal judgement is depicted, it operates mainly as an automatic mechanism. In this way *The Divine Path* places God as a maintainer the cosmos, rather than the omnipotent intervener who we saw in the earlier *Compilation of Divine Messages*.

In this direction, when we are asked to consider the ultimate use of the heavenly apparatus described in *The Divine Path* we are shown a process by Phạm Công Tắc that leaves God’s monotheistic claims in much ambiguity. In Sermon twenty-one we read:

When we arrive, we are seeking that organisation which enables us to reach a heavenly position. We must explore the invisible part of our soul and attain the most noble and highest position—the position of a Buddha. We must attain the holy virtue of the Supreme Being who is Lord, by all possible means. He Himself is the Buddha who created the universe and begets all other Buddhas. Whatever we do, we must eventually reach the position that he already has.

This sentiment is backed up by conversations I have had with Caodaists who say that “when you attain the level of a master, the master will step aside for you.” Which is to say the goal of each soul in this system is to use Caodaism as a mechanism to reach one’s own liberation so as to develop godhood and to rule over one’s own cosmos. The process of achieving this is only ever discreetly mentioned in the religion. Moreover, the task of reaching such levels of enlightenment may be so difficult as to be almost impossible. But this possibility is left open, and it does raise some questions that may only be satisfied by ongoing research. Is the Caodaist God the creator of all reality or just *this reality*? As we read later in the same sermon:

Children always want to embody their father’s nature; they imitate whatever he does. This is entirely natural. It is a part of our virtuous nature and is not at all strange. As I’ve explained, every individual, however worldly they are, wants to be God. They will always say ‘I want to be God’ because their spirits look up hoping to attain this supreme universal position.

Does the possibility of godhood for each soul imply a potential situation where there are multiple universes with multiple Gods, each cosmos being a monotheistic system in itself, but not the *only* system in the widest consideration of reality?

Conclusion

As we can see, *The Divine Path* both describes God carefully, provides a view of him, and attributes to him most of the qualities of an all-powerful and all-knowing monotheistic God. But the automatic functions of karmic judgement we read of in *The Divine Path*, and the placing of millenarian functions in the purview of other deities – such as Maitreya seem to put conditions on the full extent of this deity’s omnipotence if not his omniscience. As we have seen, the process by which the Divine Mother is created, and her important role in the creation of souls, and her directives to Maitreya in his judgement of the present age make the divine consort of Caodaism a vital and potent supreme deity in her own right. Finally, the proposition in the latter parts of *The Divine Path* offer the possibility that we ourselves may attain the kind of monotheistic status that Đức Cao Đài himself has achieved. Can all of these conditions, fascinating as they are, still confirm for us that Caodaism can be spoken of as a monotheism in any Western conceptualization of this term? Certainly, with a close reading of *The Compilation of Divine Messages* we can say that a monotheistic atmosphere shines through in the voice of God here. Yet in seeking to meld together a vast range of religious influences into the construction of *The Divine Path*, Phạm Công Tắc fashions for us a view of his religion whose complexity suggests something more unique.

That the use of culturally-conditioned and often simplistic categorisations such as “monotheism” are barely adequate descriptors for a religion that seeks, in the way that it does here, to incorporate, balance, and synthesise such powerful religious ideas from both the East and West.

Conflict of Interest

Christopher Hartney has been the Editorial Board of *JDTREA* since July 2021, but has no role in the decision to publish this article. No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

Notes

- ¹ 1955 was a golden year for Caodaism and also the year of its dramatic fall from national prestige. Early in the year, The Great Divine Temple, the jewel in the crown of the religion’s vast religious city in Tây Ninh province, was officially opened to much fanfare. From the early 1940s to 1955, the religion maintained its own army and the cooperative relationship that existed between the religion and the French-supported imperial regime of Emperor Bảo Đại permitted Caodaism extensive temporal control over large parts of Southern Vietnam. Later in the year (23 October), a rigged referendum saw the establishment of the Republic of South Vietnam, the nationalization of the Caodaist army, and the rise of Ngô Đình Diệm as president. Diệm was eager to persecute Caodaism’s leader Phạm Công Tắc. The later escaped into exile in Cambodia.
- ² Here I do not go extensively into an explanation of Caodaism itself. For more complete descriptions of this faith please consult Blagov (2001), Hartney (2004), Hartney (2007), Jammes (2014), and Hartney (2020).
- ³ This social milieu of bureaucrats drinking and composing poetry after work is a long Chinese trope deployed often also in Vietnam. See (Holzman 1956) for explanation of the archetypal drinking and poetry group: “Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove.” I have sought to use this model to examine the very earliest developments of Caodaism in a forthcoming book *The Poetic Origins of Caodaism*.

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