

Cochinchina as a Cultural Precondition for the Foundation of Caodaism – (part 1)

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ABSTRACT: The paper finds the answer for the question of “Why did Caodaism appear and develop quickly in Cochinchina in the early 20th century rather than any other regions and other periods?” In his opinion, when surveying the birth and growth of Caodaism in Cochinchina, one needs to explore the Cochinchina and its people that created and have fostered Caodaism, an indigenous religion whose ideal of global salvation was declared even in its early beginnings. Preliminarily surveying Cochinchina as a cultural precondition for the foundation of Caodaism, the author examines 05 aspects: The openness of Cochinchinese physical geography; The openness and dynamism of Cochinchinese villages; Multiracial and multi-religious features of Cochinchina; Cochinchinese characteristics; and Spiritual needs of Cochinchinese inhabitants.

I. INTRODUCTION

In her monograph titled *Peasant Politics and Religious Sectarianism: Peasant and Priest in the Cao Dai in Vietnam*, Jayne Susan Werner writes, “The Cao Dai cult was founded in Saigon in the year 1925 (...). Soon after its founding, the new religion gained a wide following throughout Cochinchina.”¹

According to the “Estimate of Cao Dai following given by the French Governor of Cochinchina, in a report to the Governor General of Indochina, Saigon, 14 December 1934. Personal Files of Governor Pagès...”² Werner writes, “Five hundred thousand to a million peasants were converted by 1930, out of a total

*. Caodaist Reseacher, Ho Chi Minh City.

¹. [Werner 1981: 4]. N.B. – This footnote indicates that the above quotation is from a Werner’s book published in 1981, page 4. For the related source in details, see “Bibliography” at the end of this monography.

². [Werner 1981: 72].

population of 4 to 4.5 million."³

In fact, the number of five hundreds thousand or a million Caodaists as quoted above has produced controversies. As a primary summing-up, Victor L. Oliver writes:

"Statistical data on the growth of Caodaism during these earliest years is unreliable and confusing. Nguyen Van Tam states they won almost 30,000 converts in six months. By October 1926 the membership had increased to 50,000.⁴ Duncanson, who is critical of the Caodai, insinuates that Le Van Trung, as a labor contractor of some frame, was able to muster the claimed 50,000 people present at the official inauguration. He implies that these members must be considered to be questionable 'followers'.⁵ In 1928 Le Van Trung claimed over one million followers. In the same year, the newspaper L'Opinion published a membership figure of 700,000. This figure was rejected by Maurice Monribot in La Presse indochinoise who wrote that there were only about 200,000 Caodai members.⁶

"Nguyen Tran Huan writes that by 1931 the Caodai had about 500,000 followers.⁷ Other writers have contradicted this estimation. For example, Ellen J. Hammer believes that the Caodai had over one million followers by 1930;⁸ Meillon in Les Messages spiritistes states that by 1930 the Caodaists consisted of about one-eighth (500,000) of the entire South Vietnamese population;⁹ G. Abadie writes that in 1932, Caodaism's followers in Cochinchina numbered 'more than one million out of three and a half million inhabitants.'¹⁰

"The divergence of opinion on the actual numerical strength of the Caodai from 1925-1932 seems to indicate reluctance, on the part of some, to admit the success of Caodaism. On the other hand, extravagant claims by others suggests a defensive posture in the face of criticism. These inflated estimates were an attempt to over-exaggerate the movement's success and to improve the image of the religion for the public."¹¹

Having accounted for the controversial number of early Caodaists, Victor L.

³. [Werner 1981: 4].

⁴. [Nguyễn Văn Tâm 1949: 4-5].

⁵. [Duncanson 1968: 125-126].

⁶. [Smith 1970: 341].

⁷. [Nguyễn Trần Huân 1958: 273].

⁸. [Hammer 1954: 79].

⁹. [Meillon 1962: 14].

¹⁰. [Gobron 1950: 103].

¹¹. [Oliver 1976: 41-42].

Oliver affirms, “*The author believes a conservative estimate of Caodai membership (adults and children) in 1930 is 500,000. In any case, even in terms of the most modest estimates, the rapid growth in the early years is significant.*”¹²

Agreeing with Oliver on the number of five hundred thousand to a million Caodaists in 1930, Werner affirms, “*Caodaism was the first large mass movement to appear in Cochinchina...*”¹³

Why did Caodaism appear and develop quickly in Cochinchina in the early 20th century rather than any other regions and other periods? One of various factors helping explain the question is that *Cochinchina contains a cultural precondition appropriate to the foundation of Caodaism.*

According to Thạch Phương, the striking cultural feature of Cochinchina is its openness in communications, its keenness towards the new, its spirit of democracy and equality, its righteousness, benevolence and tolerance, and its unrestraint against the rigid framework of feudalism.¹⁴ This feature might have made the Cochinchinese soon accept Caodaism although the new belief seemed to be different from other existing religions.

In addition, it is worth noting that specific natural conditions of Cochinchina inevitably have its own effects and strong impression on material, mental and spiritual lives of local residents. Trần Thị Thu Lương and Võ Thành Phương observe, “*When the world’s major religions had no conditions to strongly exert their influence, Southern Vietnam [Cochinchina] during the 18th and 19th centuries became favourable for the emergence of local religions...*”¹⁵

Consequently, when surveying the birth and growth of Caodaism in Cochinchina, one needs to explore the Cochinchina and its people that created and have fostered Caodaism, an indigenous religion whose ideal of global salvation was declared even in its early beginnings.

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Why does the title of this monograph includes Nam Kỳ (Cochinchina) instead of Nam Bộ (Southern Vietnam) or another name?

The term Nam Kỳ appeared for the first time in 1834 under the reign of king

¹². [Oliver 1976: 42].

¹³. [Werner 1981: 15].

¹⁴. [Thạch Phương 1992: 249, 253, 254, 258].

¹⁵. [Trần Thị Thu Lương 1991: 42].

Minh Mạng. Literally, “Kỳ” means “a region”, and Nam Kỳ means “southern region”. The term Nam Bộ was not used by the press in place of Nam Kỳ until May 1945, after the Japanese army had overthrown the French colonial rule.¹⁶ Literally, “Bộ” means “part”, and Nam Bộ means “southern part”.¹⁷

Caodaism was officially founded in 1926 long before the term Nam Bộ appeared. Thus it is reasonable enough to use the term Nam Kỳ in the monograph.¹⁸ This designation can be herein considered as a cultural one that refers to the period from the 1920s (when Caodaism came into being) backwards to the 17th century (when the first Vietnamese migrants under the Nguyễn dynasty settled in the southern region). The chosen term is not restricted to the period from the year 1834 onwards, when the name Nam Kỳ Lục Tỉnh (six Cochinchinese provinces) was officially recorded in historical works.

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As mentioned above, the term Nam Kỳ is used in its cultural aspect without any political and historical significance. The title of the essay comprises “*a cultural precondition*”. What is meant by the term *culture* in this context?

I would like to use it with the meaning which was adopted by the international community at the intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies held in Venice in 1970 and was reported by Federico Mayor, Director-General of Unesco, as follows: “... *culture englobes everything — from the most sophisticated products to beliefs, customs, ways of living and working — which differentiates one people from another.*”¹⁹

With this meaning, *cultural preconditions* refer to all culturally necessary conditions prior to the birth of Caodaism so that this new religion, just when appearing in Cochinchina, could not only accommodate to the local inhabitants’ lifestyles, customs, habits, and beliefs, but also have special features different from those of other beliefs already existing in the region.

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On seeing that cultural preconditions are typicality of the South, we, as Son Nam

¹⁶. [Bằng Giang 1992: 11, 14].

¹⁷. [Bằng Giang 1992: 11, 14].

¹⁸. The name Nam Kỳ herein does not refer to the short period from 1 June 1946 to 19 May 1948, when a puppet administration was formed by the French colonialism. When quoting other writers, in the English text, I thoughtfully insert [Cochinchina] right after “Southern Vietnam” which means “Nam Bộ” in their original texts.

¹⁹. http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1310/is_1989_Nov/ai_8171031/pg_2.

says, will “understand further why the South has some religious features which the North and the Central lack.”²⁰ As seen by Đinh Văn Hạnh, the reason is that in Cochinchina there have been “profound preconditions for the characteristics of cultural, mental, and spiritual life of the Vietnamese” living in the region.²¹

Preliminarily surveying Cochinchina as a cultural precondition for the foundation of Caodaism, the monograph examines five aspects as follows:

- i. The openness of Cochinchinese physical geography;
- ii. The openness and dynamism of Cochinchinese villages;
- iii. Multiracial and multi-religious features of Cochinchina;
- iv. Cochinchinese characteristics; and
- v. Spiritual needs of Cochinchinese inhabitants.

In presenting these five aspects, I am trying to sieve and make the best use of publications of both Vietnamese and foreign authors who are non-Caodaists, hoping that their professional view-points could helpfully offer an objective understanding of the birth of Caodaism in the early 20th century Cochinchina.

In other words, by following Confucius’s principle of “*transmitting and not making*”, I am wishful that the arguments presented in this monograph would be free from subjective judgement and bias so that they might help form an insight into the cultural precondition for the foundation of Caodaism, a young religion which has really existed in the spirituality of the Vietnamese people for over three-fourths of a century.

II. THE OPENNESS OF COCHINCHINESE PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY

Cochinchina consists of the eastern region stretching 27,920 square kilometers (10,78 square miles) and the Mekong Delta covering 39,950 square kilometers (15,425 square miles). Occupying an area of 67,870 square kilometers (26,205 square miles), Cochinchina is the biggest delta in Asia and Vietnam as well.⁽²²⁾ Situated at the center of Southeast Asia, Cochinchina has long been regarded as “*the most convenient position for connecting and communicating with neighbouring*

²⁰. [Son Nam 1971: VII].

²¹. [Đinh Văn Hạnh 1999: 30].

²². [Huỳnh Lúa 1987: 17, 19].

*countries in the region”.*²³

1. The Open position of Cochinchina in Southeast Asia

Cochinchina has been considered as a crossroad of flows of migrants and cultural intercourses.²⁴ That is why it has long become an open and dynamic convergence of both oriental and occidental cultures.²⁵ The spirit of religious tolerance in Cochinchina is also one common characteristic of Southeast Asian religions, which accepts co-existence without discrimination, conflicts, or holy wars.²⁶

2. Cochinchinese Waterways as an Open Advantage for Connecting Oriental and Occidental Cultures

Cochinchinese rivers and canals are numerous and intertwined. According to an author, the total length of Cochinchinese waterways amounts to 5,000 kilometers (3,125 miles).²⁷

The Mekong Delta borders seas on both sides. In the same delta lots of rivers run in opposite directions: some flow to the South China Sea in the east, others to the Gulf of Thailand in the west. Moreover, with an interlaced system of canals connecting these opposite currents, the sea-water in the east and the one in the west seem to converge.²⁸

In western Cochinchina, according to Vũ Tự Lập, *“Besides large rivers deriving from the Mekong, (...) there are numerous canals and small rivers. In the southwestern delta, rivers and canals are intertwined and flow to either the South China Sea or the Gulf of Thailand under the strong impact of tides which make water flow alternatively from east to west or vice versa. Thanks to this feature, traffic on the water route becomes very convenient.”*²⁹

Đình Văn Hạnh asserts that this unique feature of Cochinchinese waterways is an *“outstanding advantage (...) that makes this delta open to all foreign influences.”*³⁰

²³. [Đình Văn Hạnh 1999: 12].

²⁴. [Đình Văn Hạnh 1999: 13].

²⁵. [Đình Văn Hạnh 1999: 13].

²⁶. [Đình Văn Hạnh 1999: 308].

²⁷. [KHXH 1982: 54].

²⁸. [Đình Văn Hạnh 1999: 14].

²⁹. [Vũ Tự Lập 1978: 161-162].

³⁰. [Đình Văn Hạnh 1999: 14].

• What could be drawn from the above observations?³¹ With its intertwined waterways open to a convergence of both eastern and western cultures, Cochinchina is apt to produce open-minded people who are inclined to synthesize Eastern and Western influences. Cochinchinese physical geography might be regarded as a favourable precondition for the birth of Caodaism, a religion that “*selects the crucial elements of all past and present religious teachings and harmoniously combines the East and the West cultural values.*”³²

III. THE OPENNESS AND DYNAMISM OF COCHINCHINESE VILLAGES

1. The Openness of Cochinchinese Villages

a. An open terrain

According to Huỳnh Lúa, in Cochinchina, especially the Mekong Delta, villages “*are generally formed along rivers and arroyos. Often along both waterway banks sit hamlets with no surrounding bamboo hedges. Usually in the middle of orchards are houses facing a waterway with passing-by boats. Behind the houses are rice fields.*”³³

In more details, Thạch Phương divides Cochinchinese villages into four main groups:

(1). “*The most common group includes villages lying along waterways. In the villages, orchards join orchards or alternate with rice fields.*”

(2). “*The development of roads gave rise to roadside villages where, unlike the first group, houses and orchards do not join together.*”

(3). “*The third group includes villages found at river mouths or meeting places of flows (under influence of tides). These places tend to develop into marketplaces or towns where stores, inns, warehouses and repair shops were built.*”

(4). In eastern Cochinchina, “*villages emerge on hills or raised level areas...*”³⁴

Lacking bamboo hedges, Cochinchinese villages are not isolated or separated from one another like those in Northern Vietnam.³⁵

³¹. After having presented other authors’ observations, I try to elicit some remarks on the whys of the Caodai birth in Cochinchina. My elicitations are marked with the sign •.

³². [Lê Anh Dũng 1996: 15].

³³. [Thạch Phương 1992: 38].

³⁴. [Thạch Phương 1992: 55].

³⁵. [Nguyễn Phương Thảo 1994: 10].

On the openness of Cochinchinese villages in comparison with Tonkinese ones, worth noting is an opinion given by Trần Đình Hượu, an author from the North. He considers each northern village as an island isolated by bamboo ramparts with only one road leading to a village brick gate with ironwood doors. Therefore, Tonkinese villages look more defensive, unfriendly, and less hospitable.³⁶ In his *Paysans du Delta Tonkinois*, P. Gourou also observes that each village in Tonkin is a closed community surrounded by bamboos and each house has its own hedge or surrounding wall.³⁷

b. Open institutions

In addition to their open terrain, Cochinchinese villages also enjoy open institutions.

Explaining why Cochinchinese villages enjoy institutions absent in Tonkin and Annam, Thạch Phương argues that Cochinchina was the new land reclaimed by migrants, and “*its villages, therefore, have a shorter history in comparison with those in Tonkin and Annam. Community activities are also free from strict rules, complicated rituals, and practices common to villages in other regions.*”³⁸

Cochinchinese villages have no village codes, divine legends, and records.³⁹ Thus, according to Thạch Phương, “*Cochinchinese villages, even the quite long-established ones, have no strict institutions. (...) In general, unlike those in the North and Central Vietnam, Cochinchinese villagers are not bound by any strict codes and regulations.*”⁴⁰

Sharing the above view, Huỳnh Lứa argues that villages in the newly reclaimed land “*were not bound to complicated and strict village codes and practices. There was no discrimination between age-old settlers and newcomers. After the Nguyễn dynasty had established and consolidated its administrative machinery, the situation underwent some changes. However, in general, southern village institutions were still looser than those in the Northern delta.*”⁴¹

³⁶. [Đình Văn Hạnh 1999: 301].

³⁷. [Nguyễn Phương Thảo 1994: 9].

³⁸. [Thạch Phương 1992: 59].

³⁹. [Đình Văn Hạnh 1999: 302].

⁴⁰. [Thạch Phương 1992: 55].

⁴¹. [Thạch Phương 1992: 38].

2. The Dynamism of Cochinchinese Villages

Most Tonkinese villages are age-old. Each often has its own traditions and villagers are proud to preserve their old traditions. Thus, Tonkinese villages are often communities of some clans. Contrarily, Cochinchina is the newly reclaimed region attracting people of diverse origins. Therefore, Cochinchinese villages have dynamism as a common attribute of newly reclaimed regions. The main factor creating this dynamism is migrations, and nothing else.

Historical documents provide specific evidence of this dynamism. Indeed, after suppressing uprisings in An Định village (Châu Đốc province), with a view to control the village population, French colonials carried out a census in 1887. The result showed that 407 families in the village had come from 13 different Cochinchinese provinces. Following their tracks backwards, the very origin of those migrants was Central Vietnam.⁴²

Due to their diversified origins, most families in Cochinchina lack genealogies. Sơn Nam explains, “*There are almost no genealogies in Southern Vietnam [Cochinchina]. Pioneers reclaiming this region kept no records in order to hide their identity as a precaution against the feudal law executing a culprit’s three families (i.e., those of his father, his mother, and his wife).*”⁴³

The agricultural dynamism of Cochinchinese villages can be found in *phụ canh* rice fields, which are almost rare in Tonkin. What are *phụ canh* rice fields? Trần Thị Thu Lương explains, “*Phụ canh rice fields are those owned by non-natives of the hamlet or village where the fields lie.*”⁴⁴

Nguyễn Công Bình writes, “*While phụ canh rice fields only exist in some villages in the Red River Delta, they are widespread in the Mekong Delta, where peasants often own rice fields far from their native village. Several families possess such fields lying in other villages, communes, cantons, districts or even provinces. One family may simultaneously own several phụ canh rice fields in various hamlets, villages, cantons, or districts.*”⁴⁵

Studying the land registers of 92 communes where private fields were scattered among 8 Cochinchinese cantons in the early 19th century, Trần Thị Thu Lương finds out *phụ canh* rice fields existing in 76 out of 92 communes. Their owners amount to

⁴². [Phan Quang 1981: 214].

⁴³. [Sơn Nam 1993: 31].

⁴⁴. [Trần Thị Thu Lương 1995: 177].

⁴⁵. [Nguyễn Công Bình 1995: 77].

1,159, accounting for 24.2% of 4,793 peasants. The total area of *phụ canh* rice fields adds up to 17,635.6 hectares, accounting for 28.35% of private fields (62,202.3 hectares).⁴⁶

From the result of her study of Cochinchinese land in the 19th century, Trần Thị Thu Lương observes, “*The presence of phụ canh rice fields in then Cochinchina reflects the openness of the region in terms of land ownership interchanged among hamlets and communes. It also reflects the strong mobility of Southern [Cochinchinese] peasants.*”⁴⁷

- In short, openness and dynamism are characteristics of Cochinchinese villages as well as those of Cochinchinese people. This fact of course results in their open-mindedness and readiness to contact and accept what is new. Cochinchinese people are, as a result, easy to tolerate, admit, and actively support the new. Their mentality and behavior are most favourable for the birth of a new religion like Caodaism.

Indeed, instead of being allergic to the new, Cochinchinese people were prompt and eager to follow, en masse, such a new religion as Caodaism. They quickly shaped an extraordinary phenomenon in history, which was later called a “new wave” or a “movement” by Western scholars. These two terms might not be appropriate when referring to a religion, but they to some extent reflect the fast spread of Caodaism in Cochinchina.

IV. MULTINATIONAL AND MULTIRELIGIOUS FEATURES OF COCHINCHINA

1. Multinational Feature

According to Huỳnh Lứa, “*In the beginnings of its reclamation, Southern Vietnam [Cochinchina] generally and the Mekong Delta particularly housed various nationalities, which is a noteworthy characteristic of this region in comparison with others in Vietnam.*”⁴⁸

Indeed, including the Viets (also called the Kinhs), there are fifty-four nationalities (ethnic groups) in Vietnam. In Cochinchina alone, besides the Viets and the Chinese there are seven other nationalities: the Khmers, the K’hors, the Chams,

⁴⁶. [Trần Thị Thu Lương 1995: 178-179].

⁴⁷. [Trần Thị Thu Lương 1995: 182].

⁴⁸. [Thạch Phương 1992: 43].

the Mnongs, the Stiengs, the Mas and the Churus.⁴⁹

The Viets. The Viets started reclaiming and settling in Cochinchina in the 17th century. The Viets' unceasing migration took place throughout the civil war between the Trịnhs and the Nguyễns. The migration accelerated when the Nguyễn lords carried out their Southward march policy.⁵⁰

The Chinese. In the late 18th century, according to Huỳnh Lúa, Chinese immigrants from Guangdong, Guangxi, Fujian, Chaozhou, and Hainan came and settled down in Cochinchina (Mỹ Tho, Biên Hòa, Hà Tiên provinces and in the Mekong Delta).⁵¹

The Khmers. Before the 17th century, according to Đinh Văn Hạnh, when Chinese, Vietnamese and Cham emigrants did not settle in Cochinchina, the Khmers with their culture was predominant in the region.⁵²

According to Đinh Văn Liên, the population of the Viets, the Chinese, and the Khmers in Cochinchina in the late 19th century was as follows:⁵³

	VIETS	CHINESE	KHMERS
1862- 1888	1,629,224	56,000	151,367
1895	1,967,000	88,000	170,488

The Chams. In the 17th and 18th centuries, part of the Cham ethnic group in the south of Annam (Central Vietnam) immigrated to Cambodia and Siam (Thailand), where they were in contact with and under the influence of Indian-born and Malayan-born inhabitant groups. In the 19th century, returning to Vietnam and settling down in Châu Đốc as well as in other Cochinchinese provinces, those Chams brought back what they had got from Cambodian, Siamese, Malayan, and Indian cultures.⁵⁴ In 1880, the population of Chams in Châu Đốc province made up to

⁴⁹. [Trần Văn Giàu 1998: 203].

⁵⁰. [Đinh Văn Hạnh 1999: 26].

⁵¹. [Thạch Phương 1992: 28-29].

⁵². [Đinh Văn Hạnh 1999: 23].

⁵³. [Mạc Đường 1991: 96].

⁵⁴. [Đinh Văn Hạnh 1999: 25].

around 13,200.⁵⁵

Other ethnic groups. Besides ethnic groups living in Cochinchina before the Viets arrived, there had been other nationalities in the region. This fact was recorded in many works written in the late 18th and the early 19th centuries. For example:

– *Gia Định thành thông chí* (Gazetteer of Gia Định citadel) by Trịnh Hoài Đức (1765-1825) reads, “*Gia Định is a southern part of Vietnam. In its early time of reclamation, Vietnamese migrants lived among the immigrants from China, Cambodia, France, England, Macao, and Java. However, each ethnic group maintained their own customs and practices.*”⁵⁶

– *Cổ Gia Định phong cảnh vịnh* (Poems about landscape of old Gia Định), ascribed to Ngô Nhơn Tịnh (?-1813), reports that when white European and curly-haired black Javanese immigrants arrived in Cochinchina, their strange appearances made girls run away from the market square and oarsmen watch them with curiosity:⁵⁷

*Westerners with pale complexion,
deformed mouths, and strange stature,
who looked like monsters and demons,
scared away girls carrying shopping baskets.
Curly-haired and thick-lipped Javanese,
who were as black as soot,
and looked like celestial generals or thunder god,
made oarsmen watch them with curiosity.*⁵⁸

Ethnic groups arrived and settled down in Cochinchina at different times. They were much different in terms of social, economic, and religious development levels. For example, Cochinchinese villages were not as well organized as those in Annam and Tonkin. They were established when Vietnamese migrants reclaimed and shared the land with other ethnic groups (the Khmers, the Chams, and the Chinese).⁵⁹ “*This fact is significant in intercommunication and mutual impact of customs and beliefs*

⁵⁵. [Mạc Đường 1991: 284].

⁵⁶. [Huỳnh Lúa 1987: 45].

⁵⁷. [Trương Vĩnh Ký 1997: 26-27].

⁵⁸. [Trương Vĩnh Ký 1997: 26-27].

⁵⁹. [Nguyễn Phương Thảo 1994: 22].

among ethnic groups.”⁶⁰ Thạch Phương writes, “Many practical culture elements from the Chinese, the Chams and the Khmers were selectively absorbed by Vietnamese migrants without prejudice or allergic reactions.”⁶¹

Due to Cochinchina’s convenient location, cultural exchange took place not only among local ethnic groups but also between natives and foreigners from Malaya, Siam (Thailand), Java and so on. Cochinchinese inhabitants also had some relations with age-old South Asian cultures.⁶²

Đinh Văn Hạnh observes, “... living among other ethnic groups (the Chinese, the Chams and the Khmers), who also have religious tolerance, Cochinchinese inhabitants in Southern Vietnam [Cochinchina] have a unique and diverse religious life. Southern Vietnam [Cochinchina] admits more religions than any region in Vietnam, with special characteristics found nowhere else. The process of introduction, formation, and development of religious beliefs in Southern Vietnam [Cochinchina] was linked with the ups and downs in history as well as socio-economic and cultural features peculiar to the region.”⁶³

- In short, before the birth of Caodaism, the coexistence of different nationalities in Cochinchina during some 200 years had enabled the new region to have an open condition for cultural exchange and association. We could say that Cochinchina had allowed a multi-cultural tendency from its very beginning, thus it showed no allergic attitude toward a syncretic belief like Caodaism. That is why the seed of Caodaism sown in Cochinchina could develop well in spite of harsh conditions in history.

2. Multireligious Feature

The multinational feature of Cochinchina inevitably resulted in its multireligious feature explained by Hồ Lê as follows, “Lots of wars occurred in over 200 years, from the 17th to the 19th century. Lots of people were killed and lots of families were separated... To reclaim land at border regions means to risk one’s neck. In such a condition, Southern Vietnamese [Cochinchinese] people had naturally to trust in luck. And to avoid bad luck, they had to beg help and support from gods, ancestors and other invisible powers as well. Partly due to this circumstance, Southern Vietnam [Cochinchina] became fertile ground for seeds of various beliefs or

⁶⁰. [Đinh Văn Hạnh 1999: 29].

⁶¹. [Thạch Phương 1992: 251].

⁶². [Đinh Văn Hạnh 1999: 29].

⁶³. [Đinh Văn Hạnh 1999: 31].

religions.”⁶⁴

Đình Văn Hạnh confirms, “Compared with other regions, Southern Vietnam [Cochinchina] has much more religions whose followers accounts for the highest rate in the whole country.”⁶⁵

Though the beliefs of different ethnic groups in Cochinchina have not been surveyed thoroughly, it can be briefly said that Cochinchina has a variety of religious beliefs besides the Three Teachings (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism) and Christianity. For instance:

– *The Khmers* follow Hinayana Buddhism (i.e., Theravada).⁶⁶ Believing in the afterlife or rebirth (samsara), they live peacefully with others, avoiding the rat race. Having saved a large sum of money, they often help building pagodas or support monks in order to accumulate blessing for a better afterlife.⁶⁷ Khmer boys have to spend three years in pagodas learning general subjects and Buddhist teachings. After that they can either become monks or return to secular life.⁶⁸

– *The Chams* follow matriarchy⁶⁹ and are deeply influenced by Islamism and Hinduism (Brahmanism).⁷⁰ They believe in doomsday, the last judgement, and rebirth.⁷¹

– *The Stiengs* are polytheists and their most dominant deity is sun god.⁷²

– *The Churus* follow matriarchy. Their place of worship is usually a big age-old tree near their village.⁷³ In other words, they are animists.

– *The Chinese*, arriving in Cochinchina in the second half of the 17th century, introduced their own religious practices into the new land. Moreover, they also imported their traditional tendency to form secret societies which blended politics with religions and politics.⁷⁴

Despite its multiple types of beliefs, Cochinchina is free from religious conflicts.

⁶⁴. [Thạch Phương 1992: 107].

⁶⁵. [Đình Văn Hạnh 1999: 5].

⁶⁶. [Nguyễn Khắc Tụng 1981: 39].

⁶⁷. [Đình Văn Hạnh 1999: 24].

⁶⁸. [Luu Văn Nam 1999: 277].

⁶⁹. [Nguyễn Khắc Tụng 1981: 151-152].

⁷⁰. “Most of the Chams in Châu Đốc province follow Islamism while those in Thuận Hải province (in the south of Central Vietnam) follow Brahmanism.” [Mạc Đường 1991: 63].

⁷¹. [Đình Văn Hạnh 1999: 25].

⁷². [Nguyễn Khắc Tụng 1981: 56].

⁷³. [Nguyễn Khắc Tụng 1981: 156].

⁷⁴. [Đình Văn Hạnh 1999: 24-25].

Huỳnh Lúa writes, “*The coexistence of residents of different origins, religions, and development levels during many centuries never hinders the solidarity between different nationalities who share the land of Southern Vietnam [Cochinchina].*”⁷⁵

Huỳnh Lúa observes, “*A remarkable feature of the spiritual and cultural life in Cochinchina is that the Viets, the Khmers, the Chinese, and the Chams, while following their diverse religions, can peacefully coexist owing to their religious tolerance.*”⁷⁶

“*The Viets have numerous cultural exchanges with other ethnic groups in the region in all aspects (...). During these exchanges, the Viets absorb foreign influences selectively, thus their culture has been improved and enriched with many distinctive features.*”⁷⁷

• Thus, with their religious tolerance, the Cochinchinese found it easy to approach Caodaism and then accept it with their open mind. For its part, Caodaism is not against other religions already present in Cochinchina.⁷⁸ This explains why Cochinchina became a successful starting point for Caodaism in the early 20th century.

(to be continued)

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⁷⁵. [Thạch Phương 1992: 43].

⁷⁶. [Thạch Phương 1992: 43].

⁷⁷. [Thạch Phương 1992: 44].

⁷⁸. Among the earliest Caodaist apostles were those who used to be followers and priests of other religions, for example, Trần Đạo Quang (a Minh Sư priest), Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ and Lâm Thị Thanh (Buddhists), Phạm Công Tắc (Christian), etc.

Jayne Susan Werner writes, “*Indeed, the Cao Dai cult can be seen in part as an attempt to revitalize the Buddhist faith – traditional religious leaders such as ‘Buddhist’ monks, Taoist priests, and Minh sect practitioners flocked to Caodaism when it was first founded. Cao Dai organizers also used Buddhist pagodas for their services throughout Cochinchina, before their own temples were built, and some of the bonzes who headed these pagodas converted to Caodaism. In areas swept by Caodaism, pagoda congregations were known to switch en masse to the sect.*” [Werner 1981: 13].

from [Oliver 1976].

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