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## THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF CAODAISM IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN VIETNAM TODAY

**Abstract:** Social transformation and innovation occur in any country or territory, entailing transformations of social phenomena and entities, including religious facts in general and Caodaist ones in particular in Vietnam. These changes are considered the adaptation and flexible response of social phenomena to the context of social changes and development that aim to build up a better future. Since appearing in the Southern region of Vietnam to the present day and undergoing through many different historical periods, Caodaism has experienced many changes within itself to adapt to societal life. To spread its faith over the country and overseas, Caodaism has exhibited its flexibility and innovation in its religious and social activities to contribute to the overall development of Vietnamese society.

**Keywords:** Caodaism; Religious transformation; Religious activities; Social activities; Vietnam.

### Introduction

Social transformation is a process by which certain patterns of social behavior, relationships, institutions, and systems are changed accordingly over time. Generally, every things and phenomena in society are constantly moving and changing every hour and every day, and religion -

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which is a social entity – is not an exception. In certain ways of meaning, social transformation means a change in social structure or social organization, and such a change can deeply affect most members of society, so religions also have internal and external changes to adapt to the society in which it exist. As such, “religious transformation refers to the movement and change of a part or primary elements in religious life; reflects the relationship between religious life and social life. It refers to the change in religion (in all four components: doctrine, belief, ritual system, and church structure) concerning the interconnections with socio-cultural factors of a particular era. This interconnected relationship occurs regularly and continuously in space and time. It is expressed in all religious traditions (Truong Văn Chung, 2017: 26). In other words, religious transformation is characterized by a core feature which is a situation of dissatisfaction with current religious convictions (Henri Gooren, 2010: 49). Meanwhile, Đỗ Quang Hưng argued that “the individualization of religious beliefs plays a key role in religious transformation” (Đỗ Quang Hưng, 2015: 3-21). Also in discussing the theories of religious transformation, Nguyễn Thành Tùng relied on writings of two scholars, L. R. Rambo and C.E.Farhadian, in the Encyclopedia of Religion (2005). According to him, the similarities between Western religious conversion theories and the specific historical perspective of Marxist-Leninist philosophy are presented most clearly in Rambo’s theory: “In fact, the early stage of Rambo’s theory focuses on researching the influences of economic, political, social, and cultural conditions on religious conversion. Religious conversion only occurs in changes of economic, economic institute, or cultural disruption. The process of religious conversion may be short or long differently according to the concrete context of each community, the environmental change, economy, politics, and cultural life. The living environment changes that can cause the individual faith crisis, in particular, the deities’ image in their religious and traditional belief life. The religious conversion occurs in the context of economy and politics unquietly, but in motion; it only happens when there is a change in the economic environment, economic institute, politics, and socio-culture.” (Nguyễn Thành Tùng, 2017)

In Vietnam, from 1990 onwards, the Communist Party and the State of Vietnam have exhibited new viewpoints and policies on religion and belief. The key point in the Party's document acknowledged that religion and belief are the spiritual needs of a population segment; religion will persist for a long time; and religious ethics have many aspects that align with the effort to build a new society. The whole Renovation of the country has had certain contributions to building national solidarity and social, cultural, and economic development, and has partaken in building and fostering the sustainable development of the country. The processes of globalization and international integration have had significant influences on various aspects of social life, including the economy, society, culture, environment, and religious life. Along with the transformations of social-economic factors, the components of religion such as beliefs, practices, and community change accordingly. Caodaism moves in line with and gets influences from this rule of movement.

Caodaism originated in 1926 in the southern region of Vietnam during French colonial rule, when many people were living in poverty and hardship. It was established to provide spiritual support and medical care to the disadvantaged. Quickly, it expanded to the central and northern regions of Vietnam. Over the past 100 years, Caodaism has undergone various changes, forming congregations and religious organizations, increasing its followers, establishing places of worship, and conducting rituals and social activities to contribute to the country's development. In response to modern social life and international integration, Caodaism has adapted its religious and social activities while preserving its fundamental beliefs. Guided by the principles of "The country is glorious, the religion is bright" and "Compassion, Justice, Charity" towards "Good Life, Beautiful Religion," Caodaism congregations and independent religious organizations actively engage in social activities, setting examples of goodwill and contributing to national development and progress.

Research on Caodaism so far has been conducted by various domestic and foreign authors. They have explored the history of the formation of Caodaism, the religious activities of Caodaism, and its relationships with other Caodai organizations and religions. Some notable authors include Institute for Religious Studies (1995), Phạm Bích Hợp (2007), Nguyễn Thanh Xuân (2013), Huệ Khải (Lê Anh Dũng) (2015, 2017), Nguyễn Thị Ánh Ngà (2014), Huỳnh Ngọc Thu (2017), Đinh Quang Tiễn (2021), Đặng Thế Đại (2017), and others.

However, there has been insufficient research on the changes in Caodaism over the past decade. Only a few single articles or small parts in certain books have been published by authors such as Nguyễn Thanh Xuân (2022), Đinh Quang Tiễn (2022), Nguyễn Thị Quế Hương (2020), Nguyễn Phúc Nguyên (2022), Nguyễn Hồng Dương (2022), etc. These articles mainly focus on the impact of social change on Caodaism, including changes in organizational structure and rituals. Nevertheless, Caodai organizations have shown flexibility in adapting to societal changes while retaining traditional culture and keeping pace with social progress.

With the approaches of the religious studies and religion-anthropology, we studied some documents and texts that analysed and evaluated the transformation of Caodaism; at the same time, the authors also searched the churches' websites and conducted the fieldwork to find out the changes from the Caodai religious activities. The transformations from the organic structure and the believer component to the ritual and practices are adjusted following the social life of the believer's community. Through it, we evaluate and comment on the Caodai's transformations over the recent past in both religion and life. It shows the Caodai's contributions in the social and religious activities towards religious and non-religious communities.

### 1. An Outline of Caodaism in Vietnam

Caodaism (also known as *The Great Faith [for the] Third Universal Redemption* – Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ) appeared in 1926 in the South of Vietnam. The process of establishment of Caodaism was associated with some political figures who worked as officials

and all got proficiency in French: an official by the name of Ngô Văn Chiêu (1878-1932), also known as Ngô Minh Chiêu, who worked in Tân An, Phú Quốc and then at the Saigon Governor's Palace; Lê Văn Trung (1875-1934), a former civil servant, prestigious social activist; Cao Quỳnh Cư (1888-1929), a civil servant Department of Railways; Phạm Công Tắc (1890-1959), a civil servant of the Department of Commerce; Cao Hoài Sang (1901-1971), a civil servant of the Department of Commerce, and so on. They are all predecessors who contributed to building Caodaism and were mentioned in a sermon of His Holiness on February 21, 1926 (the 1<sup>st</sup> ninth month, Lunar year) of the first Caodai Resurrection Ceremony at Vương Quan Kỳ's house. The Supreme Being chose twelve disciples<sup>1</sup>.

In its early stages of formation in 1926, the pioneers of Caodaism focused on attracting followers in 21 Southern provinces<sup>2</sup> through the use of Ouija boards and healing practices. They followed the teachings of the Supreme Being, who instructed the Ouija helpers to take twenty-nine days off and separate to spread their message throughout the region. [Huệ Khải (Dũ Lan Lê Anh Dũng), 2015: 17] The pioneers divided into three groups<sup>3</sup> to evangelize and perform universal salvation around the Southern provinces. These three groups were assisted by Nguyễn Văn Tương (Thượng Thanh Tương) and Nguyễn Văn Kinh (Ngọc Thanh Kinh), who were in charge of preach and both were monks of the Minh Sư religion. After a month of missionary zeal, the number of believers increased, estimating each group attracted tens of thousands of followers, including many people with high societal positions. They were people active in missionary, were well-qualified, and could present, thus they were missionary dignitaries indeed, and then the intellectuals who entered the religion increasingly were vital religious guiders and built the Church for the following decades. [Huệ Khải (Dũ Lan Lê Anh Dũng), 2015: 17-18]

However, due to disagreement on policies and viewpoints among the pioneers Caodaism was divided into sub-sects that work independently such as Ngô Văn Chiêu's [Huệ Khải (Dũ Lan Lê Anh Dũng), 2017: 66], Nguyễn Văn Ca's (Nguyễn Cao Thành, 2008: 6),...

After that, some dignitaries returned to localities to establish new Caodai branches such as Nguyễn Văn Ca, Nguyễn Hữu Chính, Trần Đạo Quang, Nguyễn Ngọc Tương, Lê Bá Trang... Since 1930, Caodaism has had many different independent Caodai Churches and organizations following the direction and guidance of their leaders.

After being separated into sub-sects, the missionaries of the sub-sects within the Caodaism differed in methods. Most sects practice “Exoterism” - this is the main method of Caodaism. This universal salvation was very much of concern and was respected by the pioneers; performing universal salvation reflected all the attributes that brought religion to life, helping life, so Caodaism attracted many believers. Only Mr. Ngô Văn Minh Chiêu (the first disciple of Caodaism - the one who used the Ouija to cure diseases and study the religion) led the Chiêu Minh sect in the direction of propagating “Esoterism”.<sup>4</sup>

From 1927 to 1975, due to the political instability in the South and frequent riots, sub-sects also separated from the Tây Ninh Holy See and moved to different provinces to practice easily and take the opportunity to spread. Since 1975, the Caodai sects have continued to engage in regular religious activities and have actively promoted their doctrines, canon laws, and scriptures to their followers. During this time, the number of believers in the faith was still quite large.

Since the issuance of Notice No. 34-TB/TW, dated November 14, 1992, of the Party Central Committee’s Secretariat on policies for Caodaism (referred to as Notice 34), especially from 1995 to now, the Government Committee for Religious Affairs has issued a Decision recognizing legal status for ten Churches and granting registration of religious activities to one Way of Cultivation (Pháp môn),<sup>5</sup> along with 21 independently operating Caodai organizations.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the number of followers evangelized has changed over time as follows: In 1928, 150,000 followers were evangelized; in 1935 there were 1,000,000 followers; in 1975 there were 2,820,000 followers, and in 1995 there were 2,000,000 followers. Ten years after being recognized as legal entities (2015), the Churches had 2,668,481 followers. (Huỳnh Ngọc Thu, 2017: 21-26)

Currently, according to data provided by Caodaism, there are 2.6 million followers, but the Government Committee for Religious Affairs provides the number as 1.24 million followers, more than 13 thousand dignitaries, and more than 26 thousand sub-dignitaries and more than 1.3 thousand places of worship. The reason why the number of different believers is that many believers do not declare themselves as believers when the state agencies make statistics. (the Government Committee of Religious Affairs, 2021: 110)

## **2. Some aspects of changes in Caodaism**

The changes in Caodaism date back to Announcement 34 (1992); then the Ordinance on Beliefs and Religions (2004) and now the Law on Beliefs and Religions (2016). The policies and laws of the Party and State along with the continuous transformation and movement of society have created turning points of Caodaism in religious activities (both purely religious activities and socially oriented activities). Notice 34 instructed Caodai organizations to operate religious activities stably, comply with the law as well, and contribute resources to society. In particular, there has been a reduction in activities that take advantage of Caodaism for political purposes. This proves that the Party and State's guidelines and policies are correct and practical for the management of religion in general and Caodaism in particular.

### **2.1. Changes in religious life**

First of all, it can be seen that the transformation of Caodaism is expressed in religious life through its organizational structure, practice, and ritual.

Regarding the organizational structure, previously, Caodaism stipulated its organization according to the New Religious Law (Tân Luật) and Religious Constitution (Pháp Chánh Truyền), with five administrative levels: central, region, province, district, and commune. The administrative levels in Caodaism have clear religious authority that is specifically regulated by laws that create conditions for dignitaries, sub-dignitaries, and followers to obey.

Central-level administrative organization (*Sacerdotal Council – Church – Hội Thánh*), before being recognized as a legal entity, Caodaism (mainly Tây Ninh Caodai Church) operated the entire religion according to the dignitary status. *On title and position:* Equivalent to Pope (belongs to *Nine Celestial Dimensions – the Executive Body* - *Cửu Trùng Đài*) held executive power, and the Legislative Protector (belongs to *Heavenly Union Palace – the Legislative Body* - *Hiệp Thiên Đài*) held judicial power. The structure of the Sacerdotal Council included three parts: the *Octagonal Palace* (Bát Quái Đài) belongs to the invisible part, where God and the Divine Beings reside to operate the mechanism of Heaven, govern the entire universe, and directly operate the Great Faith. The *Octagonal Palace* (OP) belongs to the Divine, whose main function is legislating. Belonging to the visible part, there were *Heavenly Union Palace* (HUP) and *Nine Celestial Dimensions* (NCD) (also known as bi-palace). HUP was the Judicial and NCD was the Executive. OP symbolizes the Heavenly part, NCD belongs to the Human part, and HUP connects the Heaven and Human parts to solve religious matters. HUP is an agency that protects religious law and supervises NCD's activities. HUP agency had three branches: the Legislative, Religious Law, and World branches. At the top of HUP was the *Legislative Protector* dignitary (ruling the Legislative branch), after the Legislative Protector was the *Secular Affairs Director* (Thượng Sanh) (ruling the Religious Law branch), and the *Religious Affairs Director* (Thượng Phẩm) (ruling the World branch). Under the ranks of the *Legislative Protector*, the *Secular Affairs Director*, and the *Religious Affairs Director* dignitaries are *Twelve Zodiacal Dignitaries* (Thập Nhị thời quân) divided into three groups each of which consists of four dignitaries with four different functions.

NCD was the place where salvation was carried out in the human world. NCD was an executive agency, responsible for propagating religion, practicing religion, carrying out religious work, and educating people to practice. The visible organization of Caodaism included nine institutes and nine orders. At the top of the nine orders were Equivalent to Pope (Giáo tông), then Censor Cardinal (Chưởng

pháp), Equivalent to Cardinal (Đầu sự) (from this order down there are two factions, male and female), Chief-enforcer and Enforcer (Chánh phái sự và phái sự), Bishop (Giáo sự), Priest (Giáo hữu), Student priest (Lễ Sanh), Chief-management (Chánh trị sự), Faithful (Đạo hữu). Nine religious institutes were in charge of three factions (Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism – Thái, Thượng, Ngọc) including Buddhist faction dignitaries were in charge of Finance Ministry, Supply Ministry, and Public Work Ministry; Taoist faction dignitaries were in charge of Education Ministry, Health Ministry, and Agriculture Ministry; Confucianist faction dignitaries were in charge of Justice Ministry, Interior Affairs Ministry, and Rite Ministry.

In particular, whenever religious-related content was issued, HUP coordinated with OP to organize a tipping table for communion with the Divine to receive Holy instructions for religious activities. However, after 1927, the Supreme Being issued the Holy Order to stop spiritism, so OP no longer had a legislative function. At this time, the running of the church was in charge of NCD and HUP. The highlight of the organization of Caodaism is that the Church organization was built based on Heaven and Human uniting to handle religious affairs: “Heaven guides, directs, and urges; Human (Congregation) practices universal salvation according to the pre-outlined path of the OP. This is the spirit of unity between God and Human, a characteristic of the Great Faith.” (the Great Faith Agency for Disseminating the Teachings, 2009: 52)

After the day of national unification, most Caodaists were happy and believed in the Communist Party of Vietnam’s leadership and the cause of building and developing the country. Caodaism has also had a transformation with Caodai sects declaring “dissolution” in terms of the organization, such as “Caodai Tây Ninh with Decree 01/DL-CD, dated March 01, 1979, dissolved the religious administrative system, established a Management Board of the Holy See, and then formed the Governing Council at Tây Ninh Holy See; Caodai Ban Chính with the Religious Province Guide No. 901/CT-HT, dated August 15, 1985, also disbanded the religious administrative system; then formed the

Management Board of An Hội Holy See; Caodai Tiên Thiên with the Religious Province Guide No. 03/CT-HT, on August 25, 1987, disbanded Caodai Tiên Thiên Church, then formed the Management Board of Châu Minh Holy See,...

Some other sects, without officially disbanding their administrative structure, have reduced the effectiveness of their leadership. Some new small sects formed during the war against the US self-dissolved or merged back with old tribes to survive" (Nguyễn Thanh Xuân, 2015: 363-364). Particularly, after the Churches were granted legal entities (from 1995 until now), Caodai Churches operated in the form of collective leadership, through the activities of three Councils (the High Council – Thượng Hội, the Sacerdotal Council – Hội Thánh, the People Council – Hội Nhơn Sanh) with three agencies such as the Spiritual Power (Bát Quái Đài), the Executive Body (Cửu Trùng Đài), and the Legislative Body (Hiệp Thiên Đài) because the system of three agencies which was the Holy Eucharist of the Supreme Being on earth. Other churches such as Ban Chính đạo, Cao Đài Tiên Thiên, Cao Đài Minh Chơn đạo, Cao Đài Truyền giáo, Cao Đài Cầu Kho - Tam Quan, Cao Đài Bạch y, Cao Đài Chiếu Minh Long Châu... maintained at the central level (the Sacerdotal Council) and the collective leadership decided by the three Councils.

The Spiritual Power no longer has the function of legislating and managing the activities of the religion, which is now carried out by the Executive Body and the Legislative Body led by the Standing of the Church. The leading team comprises three Councils: the People Council, consisting of representatives of the religious districts (họ đạo); the Sacerdotal Council, comprising dignitaries from Priests to Chief-enforcers of the Executive Body and equivalent positions of the Legislative Body; and the High Council, made up of dignitaries from the rank of Equivalent to Cardinal and above of the Executive Body and equivalent positions of the Legislative Body. The Standing Board, the Council of Chiefs, and the Standing Committee of the Church are the highest religious administrative bodies with real authority to manage the Church, relations with the State, agencies, and mass unions.

In addition, there is also the Assembly of All Delegates (Hội Vạn linh) consisting of representatives of the People Council, the Sacerdotal Council, and the High Council. The Assembly of All Delegates is considered to have the same authority as the Supreme Being. The Phuoc Thiện (Blessing Charity) agency<sup>7</sup> specializes in producing, farming, technology, and legal businesses to support facilities and materials for social charity work. The Phuoc Thiện agency has twelve titles and positions, ranging from top to bottom, including Buddhist, Immortal, Saint, Sage, True person, Taoist, Perfection, Teaching Good, Doing Good, Listening Good, New People, and Pure Morality.

The organizational structure changes were implemented in the Caodai Tiên Thiên and Caodai Ban Chính Churches to carry out Announcement No. 34. According to Nguyen Thanh Xuan, the Preparing Board of Caodai Tiên Thiên Church held the first Assembly of All Delegates on March 7 and 8, 1995, at the Châu Minh Holy See. This was the first Assembly of All Delegates of Caodaism since April 30, 1975, and was the first Assembly receiving the new policy of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the State towards Caodaism. The Caodai Tiên Thiên Church established three councils: the High Council, the Sacerdotal Council, and the People Council, and emphasized the principles of separation of powers, equality, and democracy while refraining from engaging in the evocation of superior spirits. Subsequently, the Churches organized the People Congress and enacted the Charter to adopt a new organizational structure and legal status.

According to the Government Committee for Religious Affairs statistics, Caodaism has 13,685 dignitaries and 28,418 sub-dignitaries. It also has over 2.6 million followers and 988 religious districts in 35 out of 38 provinces and cities. Additionally, there are 64 Representative Boards and 1,284 places of worship (Đinh Quang Tiên, 2022: 344).

The Caodaism's administrative network which functions throughout Vietnam consisted of four levels: *The Religious Region*

(Trần Đạo) comprising several provinces and cities, headed by a Bishop who is called the Regional Religious Chief (Khâm Trần Đạo); *The Religious Province* (Châu Đạo) composed of several districts/delegations, headed by a Priest who is called Provincial Religious Chief (Khâm Châu Đạo); *The Religious District* (Họ Đạo) comprising several villages, headed by a Student Priest who is called the Religious Chief of Delegation (Đầu Tộc/Họ Đạo). *The Religious Village* (Hương Đạo) was headed by a Sub-dignitary (Chánh trị sự) who is called Village Religious Chief (Đầu Hương Đạo). However, this model has changed, especially after 1992, when *the Religious Province* was changed to the *Representative Board of the Church* operating in the province and city. *The Religious District* operates within the district and communes of the church, under the Management Section (Ban Cai quản).

Once recognized as legal entities, most Caodai Churches and organizations operate under the Charter. For instance, the Charter of the Tây Ninh Holy See (2023) specified the establishment of a Representative Board of the Church in provinces and cities with multiple Caodai religious districts. This board is to be comprised of a Head and two to five Deputy Heads, selected from male and female Priests or their equivalents, appointed by the Church. The Representative Board is tasked with communicating and guiding the Management Sections to ensure understanding and proper implementation of Religious Orders, Sacred Orders, Instructions, and Notices on religious affairs in the Religious Districts. Additionally, it is responsible for reflecting the religious situation in the locality. (The Tây Ninh Holy See, 2023: 17) The Charter also states: “Where there are 500 or more believers within a commune or inter-commune, a religious district, a holy temple (Thánh thât), and a shrine to the Mother Goddess can be established as a place of worship for the religious district. In cases with less than 500 believers and no parish, a Ritual Section (Ban Nghi lễ) (with a worship altar) can be established to serve the believers’ rituals. The Management Section is responsible for managing and guiding the sub-dignitary taking care of religious affairs.” (Tây Ninh Holy See, 2023: 18). As of now, there are 10 recognized Caodai

Churches with 988 Religious Districts in 38 provinces and cities. There are 28,418 sub-dignitaries, 1,012 members of the Management Sections, 996 Heads of the Management Section, 992 Deputy Heads of the Management Section, 614 Secretaries of the Management Section, and 6,637 Executive Boards. (Đinh Quang Tiễn, 2022: 346)

Initially, Caodaism was a unified religion with a Holy See in Tây Ninh. However, due to disagreements among some religious leaders on practices, it split into different Caodai organizations, sects, and churches. Division and separation were prominent features of Caodaism from 1930 to 1975. Disagreements over the use of the “planchette”<sup>8</sup> (cò bút) also led to conflicts within and between the churches before 1975. During this time, Caodaism divided into many different organizations, at times totaling more than 30 independent Caodai organizations. Since Announcement No. 34, the use of planchette in churches completely stopped. The churches have effectively implemented the Communist Party of Vietnam and the State’s policies on religion in general and Caodaism in particular. The organizational structure has been simplified, but the ordination from 1975 to 1995 was not carried out, which created difficulties in local activities, such as the lack of dignitaries in charge. In some churches, there is no Equivalent to Pope; the highest position is the Equivalent to Cardinal.

The inter-Caodai organization was a voluntary activity of Caodai churches and organizations aimed at addressing religious issues as they emerged or became necessary. Previously, the “Inter-Caodai organization” was primarily a religious gathering focused on promoting unity, fostering spiritual growth, alleviating suffering, and serving the nation. (Nguyễn Thanh Xuân, 2022: 103-110) Since establishing the 1<sup>st</sup> Inter-Caodai organization in 1955, the practice has followed the provisions of state law. There has been no issue of granting legal status or unifying Caodai churches. However, in the past 15 years, the activities of the Inter-Caodai organization have been seen as a new model for developing the Great Faith in the modern era, with the motto “Revitalizing the religion, saving the suffering people, serving the Fatherland.” After being permitted to resume operations

by the Government Committee for Religious Affairs in 2008 following years of inactivity, Caodai churches and organizations in the Inter-Caodai organizations bloc have organized 14 inter-practice activities. These activities operate under an open mechanism and occur once a year, rotating between Caodai churches and organizations. This has been ongoing from 2008 to 2023. The Inter-Caodai Organizations Conference has emphasized the importance of religious solidarity, connecting religious activities in social charity, social security, media activities, education and training. To revitalize the religion through the Inter-Caodai organizations, the newly established Caodai Tiên Thiên Academy has the task of training dignitaries for the entire religion and bringing together the Caodai Churches. “For 14 years of inter-relationship activities, the Caodai Churches and organizations have consistently prioritized the establishment of the Caodai Academy. This involves directing all available resources towards creating a training school for Caodai dignitaries. The Academy aims to match the scale and influence of the inter-churches and organizations. It will utilize modern organizational strategies, effective teaching methods, and comprehensive training content, covering doctrinal knowledge and moral conduct. This will provide a conducive environment for the development of clergies, dignitaries, and sub-dignitaries who will carry on the traditions of Caodaism, meeting the evolving needs of the religion amidst global religious integration.” (Đoàn Việt, 2023) The Caodai Academy, located at the Caodai Tiên Thiên Church (Bến Tre province), has come into operation. The opening of the first clergy course in 2023 has become an important milestone in studying Caodaism and the systematic training of successors.

Conferences and seminars on Caodaism aim to create a space for dignitaries, believers, scholars, and researchers to discuss Caodaism in a scientific environment. The Academy’s training activities mainly focus on training dignitaries, sub-dignitaries, and believers of Caodaism, (except the Caodai Tây Ninh Church, which has not participated in training and has not joined the Inter-relationship).<sup>9</sup> The

change in the organizational structure of Caodaism reflects a new model suitable for the evolving conditions and circumstances of Vietnam. This change will help the Caodai Churches adapt their perceptions, supplement and ordain more positions, and stabilize their activities under religious laws and the state's laws.

Following the discontinuation of the use of "planchette," there was a shift in the approach to Caodai's missionary. Previously, planchette was often used in missionary activities. However, since the Supreme Being issued the Holy Order to cease planchette, there has been a transformation in the missionary. Under the current circumstances, missionary serves as an opportunity for Caodai dignitaries and sub-dignitaries to enhance their knowledge and skills through preaching sessions, offering courses on the Path of Practice (Hạnh đường) (45 days per course), and providing training programs on the religious promotion (7 days per class) to educate and nurture dignitaries, sub-dignitaries, and believers to become the next generation in the development of the religion. To attract followers and deliver lectures at the Holy Temple (Thánh thất) or Parish, it is crucial to cultivate knowledge. Currently, most Caodai dignitaries are elderly, have limited knowledge of technology, and are hesitant to innovate their methods. In the age of technology 4.0, new approaches are essential for better results. With technological advancements, believers can easily interact regardless of geographical distance. Caodai organizations in countries like Australia, Canada, and America can also contribute to global missionary efforts.

Religious practices have evolved to align with modern society. Rituals at churches, temples, and homes have been adjusted over time to be less strict than before. For example, the regular ceremony used to be held only 2-3 times (at 12, 7, and 17 o'clock), and now it can be held four times if possible (at 23, 12, 7, and 17 o'clock). However, the grand ceremony still must be held four times. A believer stated: "...*In the past, if a sub-dignitary fasted for 10 days, he was not allowed to transmit the Dharma, which is 4 bows and 2 kneels. Later, the Church encouraged fasting for 10 days, and he was only required to bow 3*

*times, breaking his karmic ties. Additionally, in the past, when a dignitary sought ordination and held the position of Deputy Administrator, he had to wait 10 years before being appointed as a Student Priest (Lễ Sanh). Later, the Church adjusted this requirement, allowing someone who finished 12th grade or university to be appointed as a Student Priest after waiting only 5 years.”* (In-depth interview, a Sub-dignitary, 55 years old, Caodai Tây Ninh Church, Càm Thơ province, 2023), or the practice of rituals, such as death anniversaries, serves as a way to educate the next generation of believers about their roots. It also provides an opportunity to connect with other churches and religious traditions. “... rituals practice has evolved. Previously, families would come to the church to read scriptures for the seniors’ death anniversaries. However, in recent years, there has been a shift in this concept. There is now a trend to organize larger ceremonies for all members of the sect to attend, providing a significant example for others to see. Additionally, other religious traditions’ representatives are also invited to participate in these ceremonies. (In-depth interview, female, dignitary, 70 years old, Bishop, Caodai Bạch Y Church, Kiên Giang province, 2023)

The practice of marriage and funerals through rituals of Caodaist funerals has spread to the community. Interviewing Caodai dignitaries, it was known that “*in recent years, some families outside the religion have come to ask to hold a funeral for their relatives according to Caodai rituals, and then they converted to Caodaism*”. (In-depth interview, female, dignitary, Caodai Tây Ninh Church, 67 years old, Hanoi, 2020) This success demonstrates Caodaism’s effective conveyance of the meaning of its funeral rituals within Vietnamese cultural traditions. This has directly influenced the spirituality of non-Caodai individuals, addressing human issues both in the present life and after death.

## **2.2. Changes in social life**

When the country was still at war, life was full of hardship and people had no one to rely on, Caodaism has always promoted policies to cure diseases, save people, and help the poor. Now, Caodaism

actively participates in various social activities, especially charity work, and contributes significantly to the development of society through diverse and impactful initiatives. As early as 1938, the Charity Agency was established under the management of the Legislative Body (Hiệp Thiên đài), with the function of helping and treating the poor and disadvantaged, created social welfare achievements and developed religion in the South and throughout other regions at that time. Nowadays, the social work of Caodai Churches has evolved to adapt to modern society in terms of scale, organization, and areas of operation. This includes engaging in social charity, and healthcare, participating in political and social initiatives, environmental protection, actively participating in patriotic activities, constructing bridges and houses, developing new rural areas, and enriching cultural life in residential areas.

The transformation of Caodaism in social activities can be seen in the following areas.

*In the field of social charity and healthcare*

Caodai churches continue to engage in regular relief and support activities, such as helping the poor and contributing to the construction of roads. However, not all churches have the resources to participate in such support, relief, and humanitarian charity efforts.

Charitable activities have become an integral part of the Caodai followers' practice, as they aim to spread love to all people as taught by God. According to the Government Committee for Religious Affairs, the Caodai Ban Chính Church has been actively involved in flood and natural disaster relief efforts. They have provided 15,026,879,000 VND in aid, donated 1,327 kg of used clothes, given 107 coffins, contributed 40,401 kg of rice, and built 12 charity houses, 32 gratitude houses, and 26 solidarity houses. Additionally, the Caodai Cầu Kho Tam Quan Church has donated clothes, blankets, and mosquito nets. They have also supported the gratitude fund, the fund for the poor, helped repair and build houses, assisted people affected by natural disasters and floods, and supported poor students with good academic performance, contributing a total of 330,250,000 VND to

various social charity activities. [Government Committee for Religious Affairs, 2021: 72-73]

The Caodai Tây Ninh Church has made significant progress in social charity work. According to the church's statistics in 5 years (2008-2012), the total charity budget reached 70.4 billion VND. The budget increased each year, reaching 11.3 billion VND in 2013 [Huynh Ngoc Thu, 2017: 198]. The Caodai Parishes Management Section actively participated in solving social problems and mobilized support for the poor and disadvantaged households.

The churches support the poor in various forms, either individually or collectively during numerous major festivals in different localities. Bishop Thái Thọ Thanh and the Caodai Tây Ninh Church Representative Board promote the moral values of religion and have mobilized followers to participate in social security work, actively contributing to helping poor households and creating conditions for them to improve their situation. Due to the campaigns, the churches have constructed and donated solidarity houses and charity houses. They have also provided gifts to the poor and people affected by disasters and natural disasters. In addition, they have given Tet gifts to the poor and Mid-Autumn gifts to children in remote areas and contributed to the development of new rural areas. The total value of these efforts is equivalent to hundreds of billions of VND. Bishop Thái Thọ Thanh alone has given gifts to the poor worth nearly 1.5 billion VND. [Tay Ninh Newspaper, 2020].

With the motto of practice as ordered by God, the Caodai doctrine takes love as the foundation, the spirit of salvation, helping the needy, the elderly, the sick, etc. Caodaism opens pharmacies, free clinics, and schools for religious and secular children, vegetarian restaurants, charity porridge pots; supports flood victims, and coffins for the poor who have passed away. The rituals of the human life cycle are highly valued by Caodai dignitaries, who regularly pay attention to the spirit of the majority of followers, and it has become a regular task of the Temples. This charitable activity is enthusiastically and responsibly participated in by dignitaries and followers. "The Caodai Churches

consistently adhere to the principles and purposes of Caodaism, integrating practices into social life while aligning with the guidelines, policies, and patriotic movements of the Communist Party of Vietnam, the State, government at all levels, and mass organizations. According to the Government Committee for Religious Affairs, Caodaism has 93 traditional medicine clinics, including 135 dispensing facilities, 02 long-term care facilities at the grassroots level, and 11 elderly care facilities, with a total annual budget for medical examination and treatment of about 200 billion VND [Government Committee for Religious Affairs, 2021: 116].

The Caodai Churches have established facilities to provide free medical examinations and treatments, acupuncture, and traditional medicine, with a total of 235 billion VND. Specifically, Caodai Ban Chính Church has 30 clinics for traditional medicine and acupuncture. The medical examination and treatment activities have felt the pulse of 1,268,685 people, prescribed 118,030 prescriptions, and provided free acupuncture to 198,326 people, worth 5,998,659,670 VND.

*The Caodai Tiên Thiên Church* operates 18 traditional medicine clinics. These clinics have provided examinations and treatments for 5,098 patients, performed acupuncture and acupressure for 989 people, and dispensed 12,377 free prescriptions along with 1,670 packages of medicine for liver and pain. Additionally, the two traditional medicine clinics of the Caodai Chơn Lý Church in Khánh Hòa and Tiên Giang offer free medicine to the underprivileged.

*The Caodai Chiếu Minh Long Châu Church* operates three traditional medicine clinics, which have been running for over 30 years. The clinics have examined the pulse of and treated over 10,825 people, provided acupuncture for nearly 520 individuals, and dispensed 15,670 free prescriptions.

*The Caodai Bạch Y Church* operates four traditional medicine clinics, providing acupuncture treatments for 12,000 people and issuing 1,988,000 prescriptions valued at 3,976,000,000 VND. Additionally, the Caodai Tây Ninh Holy See Hospital has actively contributed to medical and healthcare efforts by offering both Eastern

and Western medicine services. Over three years (2016-2018), the hospital has provided medical examinations and treatments to over 165,920,579 times of patients, with a total value of five billion VND. Furthermore, several Caodai religious districts in provinces and cities operate medical clinics, thereby enhancing medical services at the community level. (Nguyen Ngoc Quynh, Ha Thi Xuyen, Nguyen Thi Que Huong, 2023: 147-148)

According to statistics from the Central Committee of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, as of August 2021, some Caodai Churches supported the prevention and fight against Covid-19 with a total value of about two billion VND in goods, necessities, and medical equipment, of which: *Caodai Tiên Thiên Church* supported goods, food, and necessities with a total value of 744,935,000 VND; donated masks with 15,000,000 VND; felt pulses, prescribed medicine, coffins, etc. with 285,000,000 VND. *Caodai Tây Ninh Church* supported food and necessities for quarantine checkpoints with 180,000,000 VND. *Caodai Ban Chinh Church* supported 50 tons of rice, 50 tons of vegetables, thousands of boxes of noodles, 2,500 coconut cakes, etc. (Central Committee of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, 2021) The Caodai Churches donated 1.2 billion VND to the Covid-19 Prevention and Control Fund and the Covid-19 Vaccine Fund. (Huong Diệp, 2021)

*In the socio-political and environmental fields*

In the political field, Caodai dignitaries are increasingly connected with the nation. Typically, dignitaries have participated in socio-political organizations to contribute to the fight against the exploitation of religion. In particular, the work of building and promoting key people in Caodaism has also received attention. Dignitaries participating in socio-political organizations such as the National Assembly, People's Councils, and the Vietnam Fatherland Front at all levels<sup>10</sup> have promoted patriotism, attachment to the nation, and civic consciousness of the dignitaries, especially the high-ranking dignitaries who head the central and local churches. (Nguyễn Ngọc Quỳnh, Hà Thị Xuyên, Nguyễn Thị Quế Hương, 2023: 149)

*In the field of environmental protection*

Caodai Churches have participated in environmental protection and climate change response under the Joint Program “Promoting the Role of Religions in Environmental Protection and Climate Change Response” launched by the Vietnam Fatherland Front. Accordingly, representatives of 10 Caodai Churches and organizations signed the Joint Program and the representative of Tây Ninh Caodai Church was a member of the Steering Committee of the Joint Program. After signing the Joint Program, Caodai Churches have included environmental protection and climate change response in the annual religious activities program; guiding dignitaries and followers to update knowledge on environmental protection and climate change response in religious activities. Some typical models of Caodai Churches were Caodai Chiếu Minh Long Châu Church registered a pilot model called “Bright - Green - Clean - Beautiful Place of worship” with a scale of 600 m<sup>2</sup>. Caodai Minh Chơn Church has three registered locations for the Green - Clean model: Ngọc Sắc Holy See in Cà Mau, Ngọc Trung Holy See in Kiên Giang and Ngọc Minh Holy See in Bạc Liêu... (Nguyễn Ngọc Quỳnh, Hà Thị Xuyên, Nguyễn Thị Quê Hương, 2023: 148). The new features and changes in the social activities of Caodaism indicate a shift towards greater involvement with the nation and a more active role in serving social life.

**Conclusion**

In the era of globalization and international integration, significant changes are occurring in the economy, culture, and society, and religion and belief are no exception. Modernization is essential for the development of any society. Faiths and beliefs must evolve to align with modern society to adapt and thrive. The transformation of Caodaism has been taking place since the late 20th century and early 21st century. Moreover, changes in government policies and laws, such as Notice 34 and the Law on Belief and Religion, have created favorable conditions for Caodai Churches to undergo positive changes and promote the Caodaism moral values in today's society.

Caodaism, with almost 100 years of existence and strong connections to the Vietnamese people, has made significant

contributions to the development of Vietnamese history, culture, and society across various periods and aspects. It has helped to reinforce the role, moral values, and position of religion within the Vietnamese community and among the Vietnamese abroad.

Through changes in organizational structure, rituals, and social activities, Caodaism increasingly demonstrates deep engagement in various aspects of modern social life, serving as a valuable resource for societal development./.

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#### NOTES:

- 1 Twelve disciples chose by the Supreme Being include *Ngô Văn Chiêu*, *Vương Quán Kỳ*, *Lê Văn Trung*, *Nguyễn Văn Hoài*, *Cao Hoài Sang*, *Đoàn Văn Bán*, *Lý Trọng Quý*, *Lê Văn Giảng*, *Nguyễn Trung Hậu*, *Trương Hữu Đức*, *Phạm Công Tắc*, *Cao Quỳnh Cư*.
- 2 In 1899, the French colonial authority divided the Cochinchina into 20 provinces and three independent cities to govern and suppress patriotic movements.
- 3 The three groups were: The first one included Lê Văn Trung (Thượng Trung Nhựt), Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ (Thái Thơ Thanh), Trần Đạo Quang, and the mediums (of a Sesance) Cao Quỳnh Cư and Phạm Công Tắc, who spread the new faith in the nine provinces of Bạc Liêu, Cần Thơ, Sóc Trăng, Long Xuyên, Châu Đốc, Hà Tiên, Rạch Giá, Vĩnh Long, and Trà Vinh. The second one included Lê Văn Lịch (Ngọc Lịch Nguyệt), Nguyễn Ngọc Tương (Thượng Tương Thanh), Nguyễn Văn Luật (Thái Luật Thanh, originally as Karma (Yết Ma) at the Buddhism) with Nguyễn Trung Hậu and Trương Hữu Đức as mediums, spreading in five provinces of Bến Tre, Chợ Lớn, Gò Công, Tân An, and Mỹ Tho. The third one included Lê Bá Trang (Ngọc Trang Thanh), Vương Quán Kỳ (Thượng Kỳ Thanh) and Lê Văn Nhungle (Thái Nhungle Thanh, originally as Karma (Yết Ma) at the Buddhism) and Cao Quỳnh Diêu and Cao Hoài Sang as mediums, spreading in six provinces of Tây Ninh, Thủ Dầu Một, Gia Định, Biên Hòa, Bà Rịa, and Sa Đéc.
- 4 This was the first meditation practice of Caodaism when it was established. (Huệ Khải (Dũ Lan Lê Anh Dũng, (2017). *A short history of Caodaism*,... p. 28) Currently, some sects following Chiêu Minh still practice this method, aiming to cultivate the mind and character, both cultivating and paying off the debt of life until the day of the religious success “Living in the world without being contaminated by the world.”

- 5 Ten churches are Caodai Tiên Thiên was recognized in 1995. In 1996, the state recognized 3 churches: Caodai Chiếu Minh Long Châu; Caodai Minh Chơn and Caodai Truyền giáo. In 1997, Caodai Tây Ninh and Caodai Ban Chính were recognized. In 1998, Caodai Bạch Y Liên Đoàn Chân Lý was recognized. In 2000, recognized churches were Caodai Chơn Lý and Caodai Cầu Kho Tam Quan. In 2011, Caodai Bình Đức was recognized and in 2009, Caodai Chiếu Minh Tam Thanh Vô Vi was registered.
- 6 Twenty one independent Caodai organizations are distributed in provinces and cities such as in Ho Chi Minh City, there are seven organizations: Bàu Sen Temple, Liên Hoa Cửu Cung Thiên Đạo Học Đường Temple, Nam Thành Temple, Tân Minh Quang Temple, Huỳnh Quang Sắc Temple, Chiếu Minh Đàn Chợ Lớn and the Great Faith Agency for Popularizing the Doctrine; in Cần Thơ, there are two organizations: Thiên Trước Temple and Tây Thành Temple - Caodai Thượng Đế; in Vĩnh Long, there are four organizations: Chiếu Minh Giao Tòa, Thượng Linh Đàn Temple and Tân Chiếu Minh Temple; in Tiền Giang, there are four organizations: Vietnam Caodai Holy See – Bên Tranh, Thiên Phước Đàn Temple - Unified Caodaism, Vĩnh Hòa Holy See - Unified Caodaism and Thanh Tịnh Đàn Temple - Unified Caodaism; in Bạc Liêu, there is Cao Thượng Bửu Tòa; in Sóc Trăng, Bạch Vân Cung Temple - Caodai Thượng Đế; in Long An, there is Vĩnh Nguyên Temple; in Đồng Tháp, there is Long Vân Temple - Caodai Thượng Đế.
- 7 Established in 1938 by Phạm Công Tắc under the Lagislatve Body (Hiệp Thiên Đài). The Phước Thiện (Blessing Charity) agency has the function of supporting the poor and disadvantaged, bringing a significant amount of social welfare and contributing to the mission in the South Vietnam at that time.
- 8 Because it was newly established and had been divided into branches, in 1927, Caodaism stopped using the Planchette (this was the means of propagation of Caodaism in the early days of its establishment) for a while according to the teachings of the Supreme Being to avoid losses and transfer the decision-making power through the New Religious Law, the Religious Constitution.
- 9 By 2023, the number of Caodai organizations and facilities participating in the Inter-relationship Conference as follow: (1) Caodai Ban Chính Church; (2) Caodai Tiên Thiên Church; (3) Minh Chơn Đạo Church; (4) Caodai Cầu Kho Tam Quan Church; (5) Truyền Giáo Caodai Church; (6) The Management Council of Caodai Chiếu Minh Tam Thanh Vô Vi Way of Cultivation; (7) Caodai Chiếu Minh Long Châu Church; (8) Caodai Chơn Lý Church; (9) Caodai Bạch Y Church; (10) Caodai Việt Nam (Bình Đức) Church; (11) Caodai Thượng Đế Church; (12) Agency for propagating the doctrine; (13) Minh Lý Đạo - Tam tông miếu Church;

(14) Cao Thượng Bửu Tòa Church; (15) Nam Thành Holy Temple; (16) Vĩnh Nguyên Pagoda.

10 In the report of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, it is stated that for the 2021-2026 term, the participation in the People's Councils at different levels is as follows: 3 dignitaries and 2 followers at the provincial level, 3 dignitaries and 11 followers at the district level, and 59 dignitaries and 177 followers at the commune level. In addition, for the Vietnam Fatherland Front Committees at all levels, term IX, there are 7 members in the Central Vietnam Fatherland Front Committee, including 1 member of the 14th National Assembly. Moreover, at the provincial level, there are 73 members, including 65 dignitaries and sub-dignitaries and 13 followers. At the district level, there are 403 members, including 121 dignitaries and sub-dignitaries, and 73 followers. At the commune level, there are 1,575 members, including 1,043 dignitaries and sub-dignitaries and 532 followers.

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