

## Caodaiism: An Endogenous Religion, a Distinct Culture

### The Vietnamese Government's Violations of Their Cultural Rights

(Prepared by BPSOS)

Cao Dai (also Caodaiism or Caodaiism) is a syncretistic, monotheistic religion, officially established in the city of Tây Ninh, in the South of French-occupied Vietnam in 1926. Cao Dai is the religion's shortened name; its full name is "Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do" (Great Way of The Third Period of Revelation and Salvation).

According to the Caodaiism' teaching of creation, before God existed, there was the Tao (the Way), the nameless, formless, unchanging, eternal source referenced in the Tao Te Ching. Then a Big Bang occurred, out of which the Supreme Being, or God, was born (emanationism). The universe could not yet be formed and to do so, God created yin and yang. He took control of yang and shed a part of himself, creating the Mother Buddha to preside over yin. In the presence of yin and yang, the universe was materialized. The Mother Buddha is, literally, the mother of the myriad of things in the Universe. Caodaiists worship not only God the father, but also the Mother Buddha. God is symbolized by the Divine Eye, specifically the left eye because Yang is the left side and God is the master of Yang. "Cao Dai" literally means "Supreme Palace", where God reigns. Caodaiists credit God as their religion's founder.



*The sphere inside the Tây Ninh Holy See, a symbolism of the Divine Eye overseeing the universe*

Caodaiism is based on the belief that all religions are but the different manifestations of one universal truth, known as the Great Way: *“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: Religion of Humanity (Confucianism), Geniims, Christianity, Taoism and Buddhism, each based on the customs of the race. In present days, transportation has been improved, and people have come to know each other better. But people do not always live in harmony because of the very multiplicity of these religions. That is why I have decided to unite all those religions into ONE to bring them to the primordial unity. Moreover, the Holy Doctrine has been, through centuries, more and more denatured by the people responsible for spreading it. I have been suffering seeing that human beings, for almost ten thousand years, have been committing crimes and spending their life in Hell for ever. I have now firmly resolved to come Myself to show you the Way and to save you...”* (God’s message transmitted through a medium on 24 April, 1926)

From that philosophical world view, Cao Dai followers believe that God has revealed himself three times in three periods of human history, through saints and sages. In the first period of revelation and salvation, God revealed Himself to humanity through the teachings of Buddha (Dipankara Buddha), and Sages (Thai Thuong Dao Quan (Predecessor to LaoTse), Moses, and Fu Hsi). In the second period, God reveals Himself through the teachings of Buddhas (Shakyamuni Buddha), the Saints (Confucius, Jesus Christ, Mohammed) and the Sages (Lao Tse, Jiang Ziya). In the third period, God communicates directly to humanity via sacred seance ceremonies. Preparing for the third period were Saints and Sages who contributed humanistic values to humanity (French author Victor Hugo, Chinese poet laureate Ly Tai Po, Vietnamese poet laureate Nguyen Binh Khiem, etc.). From this philosophical view of the world, Caodaiists not only tolerate all religions but also engage themselves in inter-faith activities.

Spiritism, where God communicates through a human medium using a mechanical device, is essential to Cao Daiism. Individuals serving as mediums must go through an elaborate selection process, conduct a pure and ethical life, receive proper training and function under strict control and supervision of members of the High Council -- this is very similar to the use of mediums in Tibetan Buddhism. That is how God reveals himself and participates in the governance of His unified church, in collaboration with the church’s clergy members and followers. The organization of Cao Dai Church therefore includes the spiritual power and the earthly power. This is manifested in the nominations or promotions of members of the episcopal hierarchy. Nominations or promotions recommended by the earthly power must be approved by God through spiritism. If necessary, God may directly select a follower to be clergy member.

Caodaiists believe that through spiritual development, they may reach higher stages of being: Nhơn (human), Thần (angel), Thánh (saint), Tiên (sage), and Phật (buddha).



*Fronton at the Cao Dai's Holy See in Tay Ninh honoring Saints including Buddha and Jesus Christ among others*

This acceptance of the multiplicity of religions as diverse manifestations of the Great Way is symbolized in the unique architecture of Cao Dai temples: They incorporate the vertical shapes pointing to the sky in the Christian tradition, the horizontal spread typical of Buddhism, and the spherical domes particular to Islam.





*The Holy See in Tay Ninh*

Caodaiism believes that humans are part of and in direct communion with God – their individual spirits are one with the universal Spirit. Caodaiism symbolizes God by an Eye, which represents the universal and individual conscience, also known as the Spirit. In Caodaiist belief, all creatures are composed of the visible, perishable physical body and the invisible composed of the spirit and the soul. The spirit that resides in each individual is part of God’s spirit and guides the physical body to the practice of good. The soul, or pre-spirit, being the source of feelings and personality, could lead the physical body to either good actions or evil deeds. Caodaiists hold that God is in everyone, in all animals and plants, in all objects. In essence, God creates the universe and permeates it with His Spirit. From this belief stems the Caodaiists’ egalitarian and humanistic traditions, which permeate their social conducts.

Caodaiism teaches the equality of all human beings and that humanity is one large family. Reportedly God communicated in a séance that: “After creating the universe I divided my Spirit and with it, made all creatures, plants and materials. Everything in this universe comes from my spirit, and therefore has a life.” Cao Dai followers therefore show solidarity to and communion with each other. They are engaged in communal activities and automatically support each other without being asked. For example, if a follower holds a ceremony at her home, all fellow Caodaiists in the neighborhood feel obligated to attend even without being invited. When informed of the death of a fellow Caodaiist, all others should spontaneously join in the mourning regardless of which Cao Dai sect they belong to. As a result of this

belief, Cao Dai followers are supposed to gather at each other's home to conduct religious activities and ceremonies.

Similarly Caodaiists strongly believe in social justice, seeing all human beings as brothers and sisters of a big family. In a spiritual communication, God stated to Cao Dai followers that: "For as long as there is injustice on this earth, the Cao Dai religion is not yet the Great Way." They address each other literally as older brother, older sister, younger brother, or younger sister. From the moral point of view, Caodaiism reminds man of his duties toward himself, his family, the society (broader family), and humanity (universal family). Caodaiists are taught to be involved in social and charity work, to fight for freedoms and justice for all.

Caodaiism's teachings that all humans are equally part of God and that there is diversity in unity have resulted in its belief in pluralism of points of view, tolerance for differences, and decentralization of powers. As the French colonialist government started to view Caodaiism as a threat, to survive Cao Dai adherents split into multiple sects, each specific to a particular geographic area so as to avoid scrutiny by the French government. The Cao Dai sects include: Minh Cho Ly in Dinh Tuong, Ban Chinh Dao in Ben Tre, Tien Thien at Chau Minh, Chieu Minh Dan in Can Tho, Cau Kho in Saigon, Co Quan Truyen Giao Trung Viet in Da Nang...

In unison with its religious belief, the organization of the Cao Dai Church follows a democratic structure with clear separation of earthly powers, with the spiritual powers playing the arbitrator's role. According to Cao Dai's Constitution, the earthly powers are distributed among the Legislative Body and the Executive Body, and the Charitable Body; three councils govern the Executive Body: The Popular Council made up of student priests, subdignitaries and representatives of the followers; the Sacerdotal Council Holy Smade up of priests, bishops and archbishops; and the High Council made up of Cardinals and the Pope. The nomination of clergy members follows a bottom-up approach: The Popular Council recommends candidates to the Sacerdotal Council for vetting. If recommended by the High Council, the selected candidates are then submitted for God's approval, through séances. All unresolvable differences among the three councils are submitted to God for final decision. Caodaiists are organized at five administrative levels: village as unit of administration, delegation, province, region and central administration. Stemming from the belief in decentralization of powers, the lower administrative units have great autonomy from the higher administrative levels.

To go back to God a Caodaiist trains his spirit to stay in communion with the universal spirit, or with the entire universe. Their temples are places for the collective communion with God, while altars erected at individual homes are for them to stay in personal communion with God. To set up an altar at their homes, Caodaiists need to hold a ceremony officiated by clergy members. The altar must not display any effigy, but only a symbol representing the Spirit, the Divine Eye.

The above world view, philosophies and practices define the unique culture of 2 to 3 million Cao Dai adherents, a culture that values simple lifestyles, charitable causes, social engagement, egalitarian relationships, pluralistic and democratic organizational structure, a communal system of mutual assistance, and an embrace of all religions.

## **Government's Violations of the Cultural Rights of Caodaiist Communities**

In its policy to control all religions, the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) views Cao Dai's pluralistic and democratic organizational structure with great suspicion. Soon after its military takeover of South Vietnam, the communist government outlawed Cao Dai's spiritism, abolished its Legislative and Executive bodies, disbanded the three governing councils, and dismantled the five-level administrative structure on which basis Cao Dai communities were organized. The government abolished the Constitution of the Cao Dai Church, forcing all clergy members to return to common life, and created the Trustee Council (Hoi Dong Chuong Quan), administered by individuals not nominated by the followers, not vetted by the clergy and not approved by God through spiritism. They were handpicked by the government. The Trustee Council holds absolute centralized power over all followers and, with government support, seeks to control all their religious activities. In doing so, the government has disrupted Caodaiists' communion with God and eliminated the partnership between the spiritual powers and earthly powers in the governance of the Church as well as in the conduct of adherents' lives. In 2007 the Trustee Council decided to change its name to "Sacerdotal Council"; however, this "Sacerdotal Council" is not legitimate because none of its members was nominated by the Popular Council (which no longer existed), vetted by the High Council (which no longer existed) or approved by God (spiritism remained outlawed).

The government has rejected Cao Daiism's humanistic values which are reflected in its view of all humans being part of a large family and of all religions being different manifestations of the Great Way. The government prohibits the impromptu gathering of Cao Dai followers, and conditions such gathering on the approval of the Trustee Council. The government's ban against inter-faith activities creates a severe conflict for Cao Dai followers: they view all religions as one and equally worship Buddha, Jesus Christ, and other Saints of the different religions; yet, they may not join their brethren of other religions in activities or ceremonies.

Following are examples of typical government violations of the cultural rights of Cao Dai communities.

The SRV government has banned the practice of spiritism. To Cao Dai followers, this ban was a direct attack on their belief in the communion between humanity and the spiritual world, bars the direct involvement of God in the governance of their Church, and disrupts the direct intervention of the spiritual powers to prevent potential abuses of earthly powers. Without the practice of spiritism, Cao Dai followers have no legitimate process to nominate and select new clergy members to legitimately replace those passing away. Outlawing spiritism means making Caodaiism illegitimate.

The SRV government, using threats and violence, put pressure on clergy members to issue Order No. 1/HT-DL, 1 March, 1979, declaring the dismantling of the Legislative, Executive and Charitable Bodies, thus also the Popular, Sacerdotal and High Councils. A few months later the Trustee Council was formed, which is under government control and headed by Cao Dai clergy members handpicked by the government for their conformity with government policies.

On May 27, 1996, the Communist Party Commissar of the Tay Ninh Province signed Directive No. 01-KH/TU to lay out the plan to execute Notice No. 34/BBT of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese

Communist Party. Accordingly, the SRV Government and the Communist Party directed the formation of the new Cao Dai clergy, selecting for candidates those who conformed to government and party policies. On September 25, the government announced its recognition of the new clergy and governance structure of the Cao Dai Church, thus completing the process of “reforming” Caodaiism by completely replacing its God-approved clergy with a government-approved one.

All clergy members, including the head of the Trustee Council, must be sanctioned and approved by the government (Circular No. 02/1999/TT/TGCP of the SRV Government’s Committee on Religious Affairs, dated June 16, 1999), contrary to the democratic process of nomination by the Popular Council, vetting by the Sacerdotal and High Councils and approval by God. With this new arrangement, the SRV Government replaces Cao Dai’s Supreme Being. It also eliminates the system of checks and balances necessary to ensure the full participation of Cao Dai followers in the governance of their community and their own Church, where the Popular Council represents their voice. The Legislative and Executive Bodies as well as the five levels of administration have also been abolished. The establishment of the Trustee Council turns the Cao Dai social structure from a bottom-up one into a top-down one.

Quoting Government Decree 92/2012/ND-CP, which became effective 1 January, 2013, the local authorities have since that date increased harassment against Caodaiists who gather at each other’s home for activities according to their culture and tradition of communal life. This decree bans all unregistered religious activities. As their indigenous religion has shaped their culture and tradition, Caodaiists may not engage in cultural activities unless pre-approved by the government.

The SRV Government forces all Cao Dai followers to submit themselves to the control of the Trustee Council, practically eliminating the multiplicity of the administrative levels of the Cao Dai Church. This multiplicity of Cao Dai administrative levels is essential because the Holy See cannot function without its administrative structure. This totalitarianism is illustrated by recent incidents in Bau Nang Hamlet, Tay Ninh Province and in Go Cong Tay, Tien Giang Province.

- Bau Nang, Tay Ninh: This incident illustrates the violation of Cao Dai followers’ right to conduct particular lifestyles and to organize themselves according to their beliefs, values and traditions. On 12 September 2013, Mrs. Ta Thi Thu Nga, a Cao Dai adherent who follows the precepts of pre-1975 Tay Ninh Holy See, decided to set up an altar in her home, which requires a ceremony to be officiated by clergy members and attended by fellow Cao Dai followers. She invited clergy members of different Cao Dai sects that are not under government control. The government of Bau Nang ordered that she must instead invite members of the local Ceremony Committee of the Trustee Council. When Mrs. Nga refused to comply, the local and police escorted hundreds of thugs and individuals affiliated with the Trustee Council to block Cao Dai followers from joining the ceremony, physically assaulting and causing injuries to a number of them; harass those who managed to enter Mrs. Nga’s home; and threaten Mrs. Nga and her family with harms (see report in Attachment 1).
- Go Cong Tay, Tien Giang: On 20 August, 2013 Mrs. Tran Thi Truoc, of the Cao Dai Village Unit of Long Binh, invited fellow Cao Dai faithfuls in the neighborhood and from the delegation of Chau

Thanh, Vinh Long to witness the erection of the altar at her home. Some 50 people showed up. Suddenly Mr. Chau Thanh Ngoc, of the People's Committee of Quoi An Hamlet, appeared with three police agents (Le Van Phat, Truong and Trung) and a Communist Party official (Nguyen Van Hanh Phuoc). They questioned her for not having the permission of the authorities to proceed with the event. She pointed out that she had already notified the local authorities in writing. They then demanded that she must hold the ceremony at the Long Binh Cao Dai temple, which not long ago was taken over by force by the Trustee Council with the police's support. Mrs. Truoc stated that she would not want to deal with those who now illegitimately occupied the Long Binh Cao Dai Temple. The police agents and government officials prepared a report accusing her of violating Vietnamese law, which she refused to sign.



*Police agents and government officials at Mrs. Truoc's home*

- The take-over of the Long Binh Cao Dai Temple: On 03 July, 2013, members of the state-supported Provincial Governing Committee, which is under the Trustee Council, joined forces with the police and thugs to forcibly take over the Long Binh Cao Dai Temple, in Go Cong Tay, Tieng Giang Province. Wielding police clubs and throwing stones, they attacked the temple, which belongs to a Cao Dai sect that does not recognize the Trustee Council. Some 30 Cao Dai



clergy members and followers inside the temple were quickly subdued by a mob 4 to 5 times their size. Sub-dignitary Le Van Ngoc Diep, in charge of the temple, was beat up by some 20 thugs. They tied him up, strangled him, pushed him into a van and took him along with 5 other Cao Dai members to the Vinh Binh Cao Dai Temple, which was already under the administration of the state-run Trustee Council, for questioning. (See Joint Statement of Clergy Members in Attachment 2)



*Plain-clothed police agents, members of the state-run Governing Committee and thugs preparing to attack the Long Binh Cao Dai Temple*



*Assistant Sub-dignitary Nguyen Van Em suffers head injuries during the attack.*

More pictures of the injuries inflicted on the Cao Dai followers at this incident:

<http://baotonchanhphap.net/forum/viewtopic.php?f=12&t=10318&p=10476#p10476>

The SRV government has consistently attempted to block Cao Dai followers and clergy members from participating in inter-faith activities. Due to their belief that the different religions are but the diverse manifestations of the Great Way, inter-faith activities are at the core of their world view and the essence of their day-to-day life. Examples of the government's interference are:

- (1) Sub-dignitary Nguyen Kim Lan has been repeatedly harassed by the authorities because of his inter-faith activities. On August 22, 2013 Nguyen Phan Hai Trung, Police Lieutenant, came to his home with a plain-clothed police agent, the block leader, and a militia member to issue a summon requesting Mr. Lan to report to the police station of Vinh Long City for questioning on the following day. The summon stated: "To clarify about a number of issues relating to your inter-faith activities," referring to his participation in meetings with clergy members of other faiths on 24 April, 2013 at the Lien Tri Buddhist Temple and on 29 May, 2013 at the Catholic Church of the Holy Redeemer. On July 10, 2013 Sub-dignitary Lan had already been summoned

to the police station for questioning about his participation in the formation of an interfaith committee in conjunction with clergy members of other faiths.

- (2) Sub-dignitary Nguyen Bach Phung has been repeatedly harassed by the authorities because of her inter-faith activities. On Oct. 1, 2013, a combination of local police and government officials consisting of Second Lt. Pham Thanh Tu of the Ward 4 Police, Nguyen Tuan Khanh (police officer of Vinh Long City), Nguyen Quang Loi (Civilian Protection Committee) and Ho Xuan Truyen (Chief of Block I) came to Sub-dignitary Phung's house and handed her a summon to appear at Vinh Long City police station for investigation concerning her inter-faith religious activities – she attended the meeting with other faith leaders at the Church of the Holy Redeemers on 29 May, 2013. The police had on multiple occasions tried to block her meetings with followers and leaders of other religions.



*Cao Dai clergy member at meeting with leaders of other religions at Lien Tri Temple, 24/04/2013*

Individuals willing to meet with the Special Rapporteur:

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Sub-dignitary Le Thi Ket

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Follower Ta Thi Thu Nga

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