



The Path of
a Cao Đài Disciple
by
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Nguyen Long Thanh

Chapter I

FOREWORD

In negotiations between Easterners and Westerners, there usually has been trouble with the difference in languages and cultures, especially in discussion of spiritual life and religious philosophies. In Vietnam, religious ideologies have had a great influence on the majority's mind through many successive generations to such a point that they form a solid system of thoughts with particularities. Scientific and technical development really helps Westerners organizing his life with more material facilities; and as a result, his spiritual life has to be disturbed to a degree by these necessities. The differences in way of life between the East and the West have caused conflicts in community life, at least in a minor form, though it is not easy for us to perceive. This advantage has grown with time until one day its explosion frightened everybody.

Ignoring the mutual profits of those who need not perfect themselves we must bow with gratitude to the voluntary passing away of all difficulties from inner or outer life. They are harmonizing distinct ways of living that separate peoples from many past generations in order to offer our earthly life a relative satisfaction in both spiritual and material spheres among the multitude of conflicts waiting to be aroused. It is to support these volunteers that I want to gather and present in simplified way the ideas from religious books, sacred bibles, and from experiences with the ridiculous reality of human beings.

The formation of this handbook and its coming to you are such a case. In the following five chapters, with all efforts, I will present in a simple style some philosophical points of a new religion which was created forty-four years ago in Vietnam. This book aims in part at Westerners who want to study the Vietnamese people's spiritual life. Here religious life has infiltrated unobtrusively into the majority's conscience and has guided their social activities. Therefore I am trying to help you to understand the real reasons that have inspired them to choose their present way of living.

The spiritual life of the Vietnamese people is very complex due to the compound influences of many different religions. As a result, religious activities have an important role in the community life of this small nation full of tears, blood and fire of war. In such a multi-religious society it would be a big mistake if the role of CaoDaism was hidden away, whether willingly or unwillingly. Through the forty-four years of its history the followers of this religion have been playing active parts in the formation of the present political policy and its organizations. That is also one the main reason why I have prepared this book - in order to help to those who want to perfect themselves through religious ways as well as sociologists and volunteers who want to support religious activities in Vietnam. These people may still hesitate, not knowing where to begin or what to do in order to be effective and consistent with their goals.

Closer to necessity, through many interviews and discussions about CaoDaism between Western reporters and CaoDaist dignitaries there has been much misunderstanding about the life of a CaoDaist disciple. The Westerners usually observed and commented with their purely physical eyes. There are also people who really want to know all aspects of this new religion with the great expectation of finding a new orientation for their activities, suited to God will, on order to achieve true happiness for themselves. But due to many factors, some of them come to a conclusion contrary to the truth that the CaoDaist disciple wants to express.

Surely, man will not be able to understand who God is and what He is if man himself continues to hold unchangeable ideas deeply in his heart, saying that there is no God in the universe. It would really be hard to understand who and how is the One that all CaoDaist are worshipping if you did not try to step on the path of a CaoDaist disciple... Now in the sphere of thoughts only, let's go on this path.

By following this path in theory you will understand the general concept of human formation, according to the humanist point of view of CaoDaism, what a disciple would do through his life from his first day of acceptance, how his thinking develops and at last you will understand what the CaoDaist in Vietnam is doing as an effort to emerge from the strictly limited circumstances of a country which is under the great stress of a war between the two great blocs in the world today- the Communists and the Capitalists.

Chapter II

GENERAL CONCEPT OF HUMAN LIFE

In order to understand easily the general concept of human formation according to CaoDaist theology, at first you are required to put aside some of your fixed opinions, if any, and try to be quite objective while reading these lines. If you find something unclear, incomplete or hard to understand about human nature, that is because of the writer's clumsiness, not because of the incompleteness of human formation, because of the writer's lack of ability, not because of the cloudiness of CaoDai doctrine.

I- HUMAN NATURE

The human nature is divine, but when we begin to study if we should start at common steps. The physical body of any one is a group of cells that form muscles, bones, skin, hair... If man is such a formation, what is the difference from a dead body found on the roadside? There must be another element added to the formation of cells to make it alive. Life expresses itself in the movements of the physical body like eating, sleeping, worry, anger, thinking... The second element is named the second body, as opposed to the physical body. If man is a combination of these two parts, a body consisting of cells and an invisible second body to make it lively, what is the difference between a man and an animal because an animal also knows moving, eating, sadness, sleeping, desire, etc. like us? Above these two constituting parts, man must have something more which distinguishes him from animal to make him more valuable in the significance of progress than any other living creature in the world. This third element is named soul by theologians and scientists call its effect mind or intelligence.

Now, let's see in more detail the three parts of human formation.

A-Physical Body

If you are a Westerner, it is unnecessary to argue about the formation and nature of human flesh. If you are an Easterner who has not studied the Western civilization, the reading of anatomy and biology books will give you a more accurate knowledge of the physical phenomena inside your own body.

B-The second body

This is the fact which causes much trouble for students. At first let's see its presence. After a day working we lie down to rest when night comes and a moment later we seem to forget everything. Our physical body lies motionless, it becomes so numb that we cannot feel the mosquito's bite or the presence of someone standing by, and sometimes we do not feel even the touch of a strange thing. Why? The second body found in our physical body to

make it sensitive is drawing partly out of our flesh, and is going to other worlds consistent with its specific activities. It still keeps the relationship with our flesh, and many people call the symbol of this relation “magnetic fiber” which makes our heart beat, our lungs breathe and sometimes it causes some unconscious movements during sleep for our physical body. Any time this relation is found completely halted we will be quite dead.

The nature of the second body:

CaoDai theology says that within and a little around us there exist another body of a gaseous state exactly like our own fleshy body. Its main character is liveliness. It attracts the vital fluid spread everywhere in the universe and transmits it to our flesh to keep the cells alive. It also takes the experiences of this earthly life through sense and impression and transmits them to other human structures that are more delicate. The experiences are pieces of brick which pave the way we are going on or they are simply the remaining traces found on the path of evolution for each individual.

The second body stays inside the frame of the physical body. However, the second body like the physical body is three dimensional and our daily thoughts and actions have great influence on it. If man lives with great temporal desires through all his life, after death the second body loaded with their effects will spent a lot of time regretting its dead flesh as the most consistent place for its satisfaction. In particular cases, someone can see the second body of the dead and we call it a phantom. It does not like to leave the flesh because this old friend helped it to satisfy all kinds of desires while it still resided in the flesh. Now it is going to lose this friend, it wants to come back and live with him, it wants to continue enjoying, earthly satisfactions found only in a human flesh, but divine laws make it leave. So it feels regretful, sorrowful...

All kinds of miracles of religious souls like salvation, deliverance, prayer for the soul’s ascension, etc. relieve the sorrow and regret at this moment by giving the second body more energy and wisdom to leave the flesh as soon as possible and not to remember anything from this earthly life. This raises the question where will the second body go? Of course there must be a path for it.

If we perfect ourselves through all our life, and if we could harness our desire and use the energy developed from it to serve all living creatures and to study life, right at the moment of death our second body will be wise enough to know that it is about to finish its duty in the world and proceed to other worlds. The second body because of this knowledge will leave the flesh easily and with great happiness like a prisoner leaving its jail and it starts on the path decided by the effects of its previous actions and thoughts.

In brief, what the second body will do after the death is the results of its actions and thoughts during the time it framed itself in the body flesh. Therefore a CaoDaist disciple

must be controlled by church laws with the purpose of giving him more opportunities to do good actions and have better thoughts which will help the second body come back easily to its divine origin. That may be considered as a favor granted by God or a natural result of an eternal law of equality depending on the developing situation on your mind when reading these lines.

C-The Soul

Now we go on the soul or the third element constituting a human being. Since the old days, many religions have taught that man has a soul but the understanding of the soul differs according to the level or evolution of each individual and each people. The effort to explain what and how the soul is by human words after a period of time - perhaps centuries - became unsatisfactory, like previous lessons to a graduate student. This does not mean that language is unable to express the ideas as somebody thought but on the contrary we have to do the same work as the former; that is, we also have to use human words to describe facts in the invisible world, but keep in mind the limitations of language.

In our daily life we cannot stop thinking. Man has his intelligence which helps him take the highest position among all kinds of living creatures existing on the surface of the world. After death where will it go? It is hard to understand or really impossible that such a wise part with enough supernatural power of creation can vanish right after the death of the body. Is that intelligence our soul? No, it is only the visible effect on the human mind or, in other words, soul is the source of wisdom... Such a saying does not mean a definition but only a sphere of significance among many other spheres not revealed yet. Depending on its level of denaturing the visible effect of a soul on a human mind expresses itself in a coarse or sublime way. So we do not try to give the soul any physical shape or image, and it is not required to prove its existence by experience through the human senses. We only perceive that it exists in us without touching it or seeing it with our temporal eyes.

The souls take its holy source from the Creator of the universe. On the way to this world it must wear a light coat of vital fluid named the second body for consistency with its activities in the world. The soul must borrow another frame which is our condensed physical body to express its presence in the earthly world. The more condensed the worlds are that a soul goes down in, the more it loses its holiness because of the pulling force of its different constituting coats tending to satisfy themselves. And the most condensed wrap, i.e. our own body flesh, is also the most necessary residence for a soul in this earthly world.

In conclusion, there exist in a human being three constituting parts - a soul, a second body and a visible physical body. Such separation is for representative purposes only. What activities they must perform to sustain our appearance on this world and what must be shedded or preserved on the way back to the divine source are beyond the scope of this handbook.

Maybe the impression will be given of scientific discoveries of transmission of natural vibrations along nerves inspiring sensitivity as well as psycho-biological activities on cerebral centers which can be tested and measured by scientific instruments. All these happenings are merely techniques to manipulate the life of a human being by a supreme power of creation, to maintain and destroy everything in the universe. Man can only imitate this technique to participate in the maintenance or destruction of life. I emphasize the technical specialty of the phenomena already discovered by science because many people confuse the procedure of the phenomena with its source of creation. This confusion causes arrogance to overrun their mind when man discovers some secrets among the multitude of other mysteries still out of human knowledge. Such arrogance slowed down human progress considerably.

II- MEANING OF LIFE

“I have set for you a test of serving on this earth”. God’s teaching derived from a divine message provides the general meaning of the CaoDaist’s life - at least on one sphere of solving social problems.

Of course, it is not easy to present such a philosophical topic with all details regarding the values of human life within a few pages because life is a continuation of spiritual activities in invisible worlds before and after the appearance of our body on this earth. The multiple happenings and reciprocal influences which result from the karma of an individual in his previous lives and toward his other neighbors living in the same community at the same time further complicate the question. What is considered the truth in this earthly life seems to be of relative value in comparison to invisible worlds. The meaning of life must be defined from a certain basis. Can what is considered the most valuable be accepted as a reasonable and perceivable? That basis must be presented in a simplified way because it involves a system of thoughts determining the formation of the whole universe. And among what has been built by God, let’s take into consideration human creation from the beginning of one man’s life.

Before he appears on the earth with three constituting parts, are there any activities or is it just an accidental happening?

All CaoDaist disciples answer yes to the first idea – there are activities. On the way to this earthly life a soul has to complete many activities in invisible worlds to be able to appear in a human body. I avoid giving those worlds special names because they can induce impressions of previous prejudice which sometimes leads to misunderstanding. Invisible activities of the soul aim to create for itself special involvements or boarding houses consistent to each plane in the invisible worlds. Still on the way to this earth, after passing a

plane, a soul must bring with it the former involvement or boarding house to the next plane where it will wrap itself in another new frame more condensed and weighty. Our visible physical body is the most condensed and weighty among the different wraps existing in a human being.

The soul after borrowing the physical body to manifest God's liveliness in a particular individual must return to its source. Now, on the way to its source from this earthly world the soul must shed its boarding houses which were borrowed in previous stages. That boarding house which was used last on the journey to the earth will be left first and in such an order it will continue to take off other constituting involvements after leaving the last coat or our physical body.

One verse in the Cao-Dai prayers describes roughly that event as follows:

"The soul created and maintained by God now comes back to heaven;

The bodily flesh constituted from earthly elements is now ordered to dissolve and go back to their primordial nature."

In this two way journey there are many stages of creation, maintenance and destruction, and we are studying one of these stages, the period when a soul appears in bodily flesh. Now we come back to the present situation of a CaoDaist disciple on this earth. What is the meaning of his life in the generality of human creation in the universe.

When a disciple accepts himself as the son of God, what are God's virtues revealed to him, he shall imitate them with all his heart. You could hear these common words from the CaoDaist's mouth "GOD IS YOU AND YOU ARE GOD" - they often repeat this teaching to recall their duty of representing God's image in this world. God's love of life is immense and in the earthly life a disciple ought to manifest this virtue of concentrating all his actions and thoughts to one purpose of supporting life and conserving all living creatures. In other words, a disciple has to serve all living beings. Through the daily service of offering flowers, wine and tea, which symbolize the meaning of his life, he prays for complete devotion of his body, his mind and his soul to God and for being accepted as a servant for all living creatures. That is the theoretical basis of human life: **Service**.

Perhaps you would inquire what are the real actions of a CaoDaist to manifest the meaning of his life. Due to differences in progress, a certain rule consistent to one disciple cannot be applied to all others. We cannot require all disciples to do the same work because the level of their progress differs. You find no law listing in detail all kinds of daily activities for every disciple from all over the world, but there exists one law for everybody everywhere which is love. The manifestation of God's love depends on each nation and each religion in the world. Therefore some law articles which are upheld by the CaoDai Church in Vietnam

may be inapplicable to the people of other nations and they may be changed. That is an important feature and a special aspect in the CaoDaist life. Strict laws of the Church are not doors hermetically sealed to the outsider but are rigid frames to make the disciple become a serving man who widens gradually the area of his activities and his seeing to receive everybody as God does.

III- RELATIONS BETWEEN THE VISIBLE AND THE OCCULT

If we look further into the way back from the earthly life of a CaoDaist disciple to his divine sources we will find more theological reasons than social reasons which oblige him to live under strict laws in order to serve the religion and society. Through prayers in death day anniversaries of the predecessors in the religion, or the dead in his family, the living disciple has a strong will for the rising of the spirit's position in the occult world. They believe that there exists a close relation between our visible world and the occult.

As it has been said before, the second body after leaving the physical body will step on the path resulting from the cumulation of its previous activities and thoughts. In other words, what man did through his life will orient the activities of the second body and the soul. That is a straight road, short and light to those who want to perfect themselves, but is a zigzag way, very very long and full of sorrow to the wicked. CaoDaist disciples believe that the work he offers to mankind will help him to go on the first way. And the term "rise in position" means only easy steps or great progress on the course of evolution. It does not contain the meaning of title, rank, and ritual robes of a hierarchy. This theological belief is one of the motives in the mind of the majority of CaoDaist; it urges them to accept the devotion of themselves, although it is not the ultimate goal of this religion which does not permit any form of selfishness even desire for progress for himself in a highly cultivated mind of a disciple.

It is incomplete to explain – as some observers have said – that the devotion of a CaoDaist disciple is for the interest of his own group in society. In the social point of view, this may be true, but if we want to study the life of a religious follower we must not miss this theological source.

Chapter III

LIFE OF THE DISCIPLE

This chapter deals with the life of CaoDaist disciples in Vietnam only. Of course, it is not an example of life for other peoples because each nation has its own tradition and customs and a different level of spiritual development.

In Vietnam, Tay Ninh is the province which has the largest number of CaoDaists of all. Almost (163,000) adherents live around the Holy Temple in a large area called the Cao-Dai Holy City. In the suburbs nearby they live among the followers of other religions and people who do not have any faith. The percentage of CaoDaists in the population of the whole province is about 70%. They also live in most of the provinces in Southern Vietnam and in a number of provinces in North Vietnam. Before the division of territory by the Geneva Accords of 1954, some CaoDaist dignitaries were sent there and they succeeded in establishing some local missionary facilities. In the present social situation, the contact with CaoDaist followers in Northern Vietnam has become more difficult.

INITIATION

To become a disciple a normal person must go through a visible rite of initiation which has spiritual value to the church and to the disciples themselves. Each religion has its own way to manifest the meaning of this ritual. The disciple must kneel down in front of God's altar and take a solemn oath which is translated as follows:

"I am... , ... years of age. From now on I decide to follow Caodaism. I will never change my mind or heart. I will live in harmony with other disciples, and will obey CaoDai laws. If I betray the Faith I will be punished by Heaven and Earth."

This ritual is presided over and witnessed by a dignitary of any rank in the hierarchy. In remote areas which dignitaries cannot frequent, the sub-dignitary (representative of the Church by election at the village level) may preside over the ritual.

After the ritual of initiation the disciple receives a temporary certificate which is called in Vietnamese "*So Cau Dao*" (1). From this day the disciple must obey some initial rules and do some daily services such as eating only vegetarian food at least 6 days per month (2) and going to the temple for communal prayers twice a month on the first and fifteen days of the lunar month. According to CaoDaists, the word "fast" means to feed the physical body with special kinds of food coming from vegetables. They are not permitted to eat meat coming from flesh of any kind of animal from the big one like a cow or hog, to the smaller ones like crabs, shrimp, etc... In other words, the food they use must not come from the killing of any animal. After 5 months of practice the disciple begins to eat the vegetarian

diet for ten days per month (3) and he may remain at this level through all his life if he does not want to go further.

Twice a month the disciple must go to the temple to pray. The prayers are the same all over the country. In the ceremony you may see the ritual called “dang so” (a way to send a petition to God). The requests are written in the form of a letter in an envelope. The content generally deals with great problems of the church and mankind to send to God and other Holy Spirits. A man kneels before God’s altar and reads aloud the petition while others keep silent. When he finished reading, the letter is burned. That is the manifestation of faith in God and also is a way to concentrate the thoughts of many people to one will to make it stronger. After such a communal prayer the disciple may pray for his own life if he wants to (4). During the six months of practice the disciple must learn by heart the prayers in verse, get acquainted with rituals in daily services and big ceremonies, and observe a vegetarian diet at the minimum level of 6 days a month. After the end of the practice period if he shows himself able to fulfill these duties the Church will give him a real certificate to replace the temporary one.

(1) So: a piece of paper on which certain appeals or requests are written, and are sent to God or Holy Spirits or the King or Emperor.

Cau Dao: application to become a member of a religion.

(2) Six days in the vegetarian diet in a lunar month are: the 1st, 8th, 14th, 15th, 23rd, and 30th (or the 29th if the month has 29 days only).

(3) Ten days in the vegetarian diet in a lunar month are: the 1st, 8th, 14th, 15th, 18th, 23rd, 24th, 28th, 29th, and 40th (or the 27th if the month has only 29 days).

(4) For more details on the ceremony, please see: “History and Philosophy of CaoDaim” by Gabriel Gobron.

WAYS OF SERVING IN THE RELIGION

Now the disciple is really accepted and there are many ways of serving that religious laws reserve for him. A disciple may enter into and hold a post in almost all organizations of the Church if he can prove his capacity. Almost all CaoDaist titles in the hierarchy can be replaced by election, except those appointed by God or the Divine through means of communication with a device called “co but”, and those which divine messages did not teach anything about replacing by election.

Before describing different ways of serving in the religion, we should know the outline of the church organization.

To operate the religion there must be activities of three boards at the same time:

-The “*Bat Quai Dai*” or the Holy Council directs all activities of the universe under the leadership of God and Holy Spirits.

-The “*Hiep Thien Dai*” or Legislative Body has the duty to communicate with the occult to receive divine messages, to preserve the religious laws and listen to the complaints of the miserable, meaning to symbolize equality in the religion.

-The “*Cuu Trung Dai*” or Executive Body takes charge of missionary activities; it is also called the Administration Body.

Earthly man can work only in two of the three bodies - the “*Hiep Thien Dai*” and the “*Cuu Trung Dai*”. The “*Bat Quai Dai*” exists only in the faith of the disciple, symbolizing the authority of the invisible Holy Spirits and God. So far, I have not found any clear explanations how the Holy Spirits work in the “*Bat Quai Dai*”, except some revelations by His Holiness Ho Phap Pham Cong Tac from what he saw and heard in a journey to God during his earthly life (1). He was permitted to publish only a restricted number of facts in this domain, there were many other things revealed to him but he was not allowed say more.

(1) See “The Path of Eternal Life” by H H Ho Phap Pham Cong Tac.

How to serve in the “*Cuu Trung Dai*”

If we want to be a member of the Executive Board we can hold the following titles:

-Dao huu: Follower.

-Chuc viec: Sub-dignitary.

-Le Sanh: Student Priest.

-Giao-Huu: Priest.

-Giao-Su: Bishop.

-Phoi-Su: Archbishop.

-Dau Su: Cardinal.

-Chuong Phap: Censor Cardinal.

-Giao-Tong: Caodai Pope.

The authority of the “Giao-Tong” or CaoDai Pope is not like that of the Catholic Pope in the Roman Church. The translated terms of the titles in the hierarchy give us some idea of equivalence in rank only. Likewise, there are many differences between the “*Giao-Huu*” and what you may understand by the word “CaoDai Priest” the first time you hear it.

According to the religious laws of CaoDaism, if a follower wants to be a member of the sub-dignitary level, he must be selected by a vote of all other followers in the village. Of course, he or she must be a worthy disciple, obey the Church law and have good behavior. There are three titles for the rank of sub-dignitary.

-“Chanh Tri-Su” or Chief of a religious village.

-“Pho Tri-Su” or Deputy Chief for Administration.

-“Thong Su” or Commissioner of Justice in a religious village.

A chief may have several vice-chiefs and commissioners of justice under him; in that case each of the two sub-dignitaries takes charge of a hamlet.

The “Chanh-Tri Su” can also be called “minor Dau-Su” or the representative of the CaoDai Cardinal’s authority at the village level.

The “Pho Tri-Su” or “minor Giao-Tong” represents the Pope’s authority (1) at the village level.

The “Thong Su” or “minor Ho-Phap” represents the Ho-Phap’s authority at the village level.

Both the deputy-chief and the commissioner of justice are responsible for the village chief and are of equal rank. The “Chanh Tri Su” or Chief of a CaoDai religious village can be lifted to the rank of Student-Priest after 5 years of fulfilling his duty.

(1) In CaoDaism “*Ho-Phap*” is the title equivalent to the “*Giao-Tong*” ... Ho-Phap and Giao-Tong are of equal rank, both equivalent to the Catholic Pope.

The total number of CaoDai Student-Priests is unlimited. A student-priest can become a priest after 5 years of fulfilling his duty. The total number of acting CaoDai priests is limited to 3000, who are divided into 3 branches:

-“Phai Thai” or the way of the Buddhas wear yellow robe, numbering in 1000 priests.

-“Phai Thuong” or the way of the Immortals wear sky-blue robe, numbering in 1000 priests.

-“Phai Ngoc” or the way of the Saints wear red robe, numbering in 1000 priests.

God confirmed this limitation when He established the “Phap Chanh Truyen” or the “Constitution of CaoDaism”. Thus no human may change this number. The 3000 CaoDai priests are counted from acting dignitaries only; the retired or dismissed ones are excluded.

The priest is the lowest rank in the hierarchy to be considered a member of the Sacerdotal or body of God. A priest can be elevated to other higher ranks all the way to the highest title in the Executive Body, i.e. the CaoDai Pope. The total number in the other higher ranks are:

-Bishop: 72; 24 for each branch.

-Archbishop: 36; 12 for each branch (included in this number are 3 Principal Archbishops, one for each branch.

-Cardinal: 3; one for each branch.

-Censor Cardinal: 3; one for each branch.

-Pope: one. There is one Giao-Tong (Pope) who is the Chief or leader of the “Cuu Trung Dai”.

This limitation is not applied for the nuns. Female dignitaries may not hold the position of Pope or Censor Cardinal. The highest title for a CaoDai nun is Cardinal. Thus a female follower may rise from a simple follower through all ranks to a cardinal with the number in each rank being unlimited.

In general, almost all titles in the CaoDai hierarchy can be selected by vote. To hold a higher rank a dignitary must fulfill duties which are different for each rank in a period of time determined by the law, generally for 5 years, and he must wait until there is a vacancy in the posts of the next higher rank. For example, the total number of acting CaoDai Archbishops in the Confucius branch reaches 12, that is the maximum number fixed by the “Phap Chanh Truyen”; a Bishop of the Confucius branch who has finished 5 years or even 6 years of service in his position must also wait until one Archbishop (of Confucius branch)

leaves his position to be lifted to the Archbishop rank by election. An exception is the rank of Principal Archbishops, who are appointed by the “Giao Tong”.

The election of CaoDai dignitaries is carried out within each branch. For example, all Student-priests select worth ones to be nominated as Priests; all Priests select worthy ones to be nominated as Bishops. Here there is an exception: the “Giao Tong” must be elected by all followers and he can be selected from dignitaries in the two ranks of Censor Cardinal and Cardinal.

That summarizes the method used to select dignitaries of the Executive body by vote based on what is described in the religious books “*Tan Luat* and *Phap Chanh Truyen*”. But at present I notice that when choosing a dignitary for a higher echelon the Church does not let all dignitaries of the same rank select for themselves, but always consult the Popular Council first; then the decision of the Sacerdotal Council, the decision of the High Council and finally the Supreme decision of the Divine through spiritist communication. At present there are not enough dignitaries for each echelon as limited by the “Phap Chanh Truyen”.

In the initial foundation stages of this religion most dignitaries were appointed by God and so far there have been exceptions in which some dignitaries received a higher rank not by voting but by appointment of the Divine authority in messages received through communication by “co but” (1) taking place at an area right in front of God’s altar at the Caodai main Holy Temple in the Tay Ninh Holy See.

One thing to be mentioned is that all visible titles of dignitaries in the CaoDai Sacerdotal are considered equivalent to those of Angels, Saints, and Buddha, i.e. all ranks of Holy Spirits in the invisible world. Of course when a soul leaves his temporal body, things such as the titles, echelons, etc. of the earthly life become meaningless. The term “divine rank” that Caodaists usually use means only the level of evolution for a soul.

For further information about the duties and services of dignitaries in each rank, the following books are recommended - Pham Chanh Truyen (The Constitution of Caodaism), Tan Luat (The New Cononical Codes), Dao Luat nam Mau Dan (The religious Law of the Year of the Tiger 1938).

How to serve in the “Hiep Thien Dai”

The “Hiep Thien Dai” or Legislative Body has 2 categories of dignitaries: high dignitaries nominated by God from the early days of CaoDai history who cannot be replaced by votes, and lower dignitaries nominated by the Church; the total number is unlimited for this latter category.

Dignitaries in this Body hold the power of justice in the religion. They establish courts to judge violations of religious laws by dignitaries and followers (2). They also have the duty

to investigate all actions of dignitaries to supply the Church with information proving that a dignitary obeys or disobeys the Church laws as well as his behavior that he really serves for everybody.

A CaoDaist disciple can begin to work in the Hiep Thien Dai at the post of “Luat Su” (student of Church Law) and gradually he can be elevated to “Tiep Dan Dao Nhon” according to the following order:

-Student of Church Law (Luat Su) - Archivist (Si Tai) - Investigator (Truyen Trang) - Historian (Thua Su) - Inspector (Giam Dao) - Lawyer (Cai Trang) - Chancellor (Chuong an) - Instructor (Tiep Dan Dao Nhon).

When an Instructor succeeds in propagating CaoDaism in a country, he may be selected to replace one of the twelve zodiacal dignitaries if there is a vacant post. Besides the judging and investigation, high dignitaries of the “Hiep Thien Dai” also have to establish communication with God and the Holy Spirits to receive divine teachings or supreme orders in governing the Church.

(1) Co but is a means of communication in which 2 mediums interpret Holy thoughts by writing letters on a board, the device used to write has the form of a basket with a long bill.

(2) There is another type of court named “Toa Tam Giao Cuu Trung Dai”, a supreme judicial counsel of the “Cuu Trung Dai”.

How to serve in the “Charity Body”

Besides the two plans that have just been presented, we may find another path which is charity work under the Legislative Body. The twelve divine ranks for dignitaries in this organ from the lowest to the highest are as follows:

- Minh Duc, Tan Dan, Thinh Thien, Hanh Thien, Giao Thien, Chi Thien, Dao Nhon, Chon Nhon, Hien Nhon, Thanh Nhon, Tien Tu, Phat Tu.

The total number of dignitaries in each echelon of the Charity Body is unlimited. A disciple who has fulfilled his duty for 3 years may move up to the next echelon.

Charity is an organ to maintain the temporal life, and to deliver man from sorrow. It seeks ways to help the handicapped, the ignorant, the uneducated; it helps the Executive Body administering religious laws. It is the community welfare organization of the Church. The

most important man in the formation of this organization was His Holiness Ho Phap Pham Cong Tac.

To better understand the charity activities by Vietnamese CaoDaists, below is a list of some essential requirements for a disciple in the Charity Body which he must try to practice from the beginning.

“Each religious district must establish a charity service used as a place to make plans and control all charity activities in the district.

Each religious village must organize many facilities for framing, commerce and industry; they are all put under the control of the District Charity Service.

Each Charity Service must establish indispensable organizations, including Maternity, Hospital, Kindergarten, Home for the elderly, and School.”

(From Articles 24, 25, 26 of the Religious Law of the year of the Tiger, chapter 2).

These necessities are based upon the Vietnamese social situation; of course, other countries will have different requirements.

How to serve in the esoteric practice

Leaving the Charity Body, we can find another path quite immense and mystic to our mind. It is the esoteric practice (tu chon). It is not ruled directly by church laws which specify and require certain work to be done and certain virtues to have as conditions for each rank in the hierarchy, but in fact we discipline ourselves under spiritual articles as severe as those of other dignitaries. Here we may retain the title of the simple follower of the Church through all our life but we must try to perfect ourselves and really serve society forever. So far, I have not seen any particular law for CaoDai disciples going on this way. There is some guidance by His Holiness Ho Phap Pham Cong Tac which I think is rather suitable to be included here.

Method of Training the Self to enter the third Way of CaoDaiism

- Be close to all people, i.e. come back to the source of all living creatures and spirits.
- Be kind and forgiving.
- Be free in your mind, never selfish.
- Be peaceful and calm, i.e., do not be influenced by bad or good luck, joy or sorrow. Accept joy and sorrow, but do not let their poisonous barbs permeate your true nature.
- Be generous, kind and forgiving.

-Be merry, moderate, self controlled and decisive.

-Conscience is the principle for all.

-Be pious to God and the Holy Mother.

Method of Training the conscience which comes from God's light

-Faith and wisdom are the most valuable treasure; anything else is dispensable.

-Who hates his enemy cannot be a calm and just man.

-Who does not hate will win over his enemy. Hate is the greatest sorrow of a human being; therefore, a good man never thinks of or annihilates it.

-Overcome your anger and you will not make others angry.

-Use good to overcome evil.

-Use kindness to overcome savagery.

-Use generosity to overcome selfishness.

-Use right to overcome wrong.

That is the Magic Sword of Wisdom.

Method of Mental Training

-Eat pure food

-Think pure thoughts.

-Have strong faith in God and the Holy Mother.

-Love immensely.

That is the key to unlock the "*Bat Quai Dai*" right in this earthly life.

In fact, this guidance can be applied to all disciples, not just for esoteric practitioners.

Besides, the CaoDai New Law contains one chapter dealing with the life of the esoteric student, enveloping eight articles and an introduction originally in Vietnamese.

MEDITATION HALL

A Meditation Hall is a tranquil place for the esoteric practice of the disciple. To get into a Meditation Hall, the disciple must obey the following rules:

1. Those who are able to fulfill all their family duties and maintain a permanent vegetarian diet for at least 6 successive months may be accepted to a Meditation Hall.
2. He must have a friend who is more advanced in esoterism to guide him and a second one to help him.
3. Communication by mail with outsiders is not permitted except with family but mail must be controlled first by the chief of the hall.
4. No outsider, even dignitaries or family relations are permitted to come into the hall.
5. Talking with an outsider is not permitted, except with parents or family relations, but there must be permission from the chief first.
6. The esoteric student must stop smoking, and chewing betel; he is allowed to eat nothing but daily meals.
7. The student must keep his mind in peace, not let his conscience be moved, live in harmony with others, not speak loud, try to help and guide each other in a religious way.
8. The student must obey the chief's orders; each must follow his own timetable to practice esoterism.

There are 3 places for esoteric practice: one named "Tri Giac Cung" about 7 (3?) kilometers southeast of the Tay Ninh Holy See, another named "Tri Hue Cung" about 9 (?) kilometers in the same direction. The third place was designed to be on the Ba Den mountain, about 8 kilometers North of the Holy See, but the building has not been finished yet. HH Ho Phap Pham Cong Tac advised everybody to begin the religious life by serving first all living creatures. Only when the disciple felt himself that he had fulfilled his service to the world through 3 ways - deeds, words and virtue - will he be able to follow esoteric practice. Anyone beginning to soon on this path while the 3 bodies - physical, astral, and spiritual - of the disciple are not yet prepared to receive the mystic source of energy pouring in him day and night will encounter complete failure.

PERFECTION OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

Whatever path we follow the spiritual life is always the foundation for all applied actions. Therefore, the Cao-Dai disciple has the duty to perfect his spiritual life everyday to let God's love and equality infiltrate his thoughts, this is expressed by his thoughtful feeling and action. That is a very simple principle but training the disciple's heart to such a degree, on the other hand, is very difficult, perhaps more difficult than building a nation.

Many ways are available to help the disciple to perfect his spiritual life such as law articles of the Church, prayers in daily services and in the moment of working, they really keep the disciple's thoughts and feelings close to the virtue of God. Law effects by reprimanding, punishing all offenses, that means the disciple may find beside him an observer to look

after him permanently. Due to the fear of punishment the disciple tries to control himself and go on the right path. Prayers effect by using mental energy from the disciple himself, from others, from God and Holy Spirits to wake his conscience by repeating divine moving appeals. At first, the conscience listens to the appealing at a definite time in daily services, later it will be urged to hear more and more of God's appealing to a wide extent before acting. No limitation exists in the path – the perfection of the spiritual life – we may retain the title of simple follower through all our life and the evolution is not bound to the titles.

From the Church law the Five Interdictions and the Four Great Rules are applied for all ranks of disciples.

FIVE INTERDICTIONS:

1. No killing of living beings.
2. No coveting, including stealing, robbing, cheating, borrowing without giving back, storing stolen things, taking lost things for your own use, avaricious thoughts, gaining profit by doing harm to others or gambling.
3. No wrong sexual intercourse, including the intercourse with the husband or wife of others, whoring, exciting others to come to unlawful sexual intercourse, sexual thinking on seeing beauty or flirting words for sexual pleasure.
4. No drinking alcohol – no drinking alcohol and eating the flesh of an animal which provokes troubles in the perispirit and makes noise for others, no greediness, no desire for alcohol and meat.
5. No telling a lie – including insolent words, deceit by word, display of the faults of others, self bolstering, making true the false, making false the true, mocking, scorning, speaking ill in the absence of others, making others angry and quarreling, urging the sueing, using impolite words, scolding, deprecating the religion, forgetting promises.

THE FOUR GREAT RULES:

1. Obey the teaching of the superior, listen to the teaching of the inferior. Live in harmony with others in ritual essence. Feel remorse and accept your faults.

2. Never be proud of your own talent, never mind your own efforts in helping others to succeed. Help others in perfecting themselves, do not remember your own hate. Do not prevent an honest man from working.

3. Be clear at expenses and income of money, never borrow without giving back.
Be polite to everybody, the superior as well as the inferior in advising and teaching.

4. Be sincere in both the presence and absence of others. Never let co-religionists go on quarreling without reconciling. Never take common property for your own use, or abandon public services for your own services. Do not let your individual opinion make you disobey religious laws. Do not use your authority to lower the talent of others.

Regarding prayers, besides the ones glorifying the Supreme Being, Buddha, Saints and Angels read at a definite time in daily services, you may find other verses which bring about effects by reminding the disciple to respect the Divine always present near him, to control himself, to correct his faults and to widen his love. They are:

- Prayers for repentance,

- Prayers for self-correction,

- Prayers for praising the work and virtue of the Holy Spirits.

I pay particular attention to lay prayers which were forgotten by many followers because of laziness and their daily work. The following are the main ideas derived from the lay prayers.

PRAYERS WHEN GETTING UP:

On awaking, I thank God, My Great Father who did me a favor through the dream. You taught me the lesson of death and living alike, sleeping and awaking.

From this moment of aurora, I will be busy with the life for earning my living.

It is quite a misery, being on this earth, and my life is full of difficulties.

Oh! My Beloved Father, I pray for Your help. Illuminate me by your miracle more and more. Show me sin and holiness. Make my conscience clean enough to better this world.

Oh! God, Buddha, Saint, Angel, all superior to me, please help me to follow you, to leave this dark earthly life, to get close to the Divine.

“Nam Mo Cao Dai Tien Ong Dai Bo Tat Ma Ha Tat”.

PRAYERS WHEN GOING OUT:

In the social activities of daily life,

My body, like the bubble floating on the water, must go here and there several times.

Afraid of the denaturation in my heart before the frightening changes of this life, I pray for Cao-Dai's protection in each of my steps going out.

If there happens some killing of living beings by my step on the road, I pray God to forgive my sin, may the essence of the killed beings understand my thinking.

Almighty God! Keep me away from thorns on the road,

To go out in safety and come back safe.

May my divine journey from You and back to You be the same.

"Nam Mo Cao Dai Tien Ong Dai Bo Tat Ma Ha Tat."

PRAYERS WHEN COMING HOME:

Thanks for the Superior's help which kept my conscience unchanged to fulfill all my duties from the moment of leaving to coming back.

Now I am being reminded of the departure from Heaven the procession of the Holy Mother by the Hon's dynasty,

Being reminded of Siddhartha Gotama on his horse leaving the Royal Palace,

Lao-Tzu giving up the court-life and going to the mountain by his buffalo cart,

The presence of God himself by miracle on Oliver Mount .

I pray to find the way to deliverance from sorrows and miseries.

"Nam Mo Cao Dai Tien Ong Dat Bo Tat Ma Ha Tat".

PRAYERS BEFORE STUDYING:

I pray God to wake my intelligence to understand easily what is taught by the teacher. Let me live close to the good, far from the bad.

Let me rely on God's Magic Sword of Wisdom to cut through Karmic fastenings. Help me to follow the Saint's way full of difficulties, train me to obey the Saint's rules from early childhood to adulthood.

Make me love my classmates with all kindness through the life and after death.

I pray to follow the three duties to society and the five individual qualifications taught by Confucius.

I pray to glorify all my family relations, dead and alive, to love every person in my social life later.

May be Divine Ego pour down upon me intelligence for understanding letters and rituals.

May God help me to succeed in my studies.

Nam Mo Cao-Dai Tien Ong Dai Bo Tat Ma Ha Tat.

PRAYERS BEFORE EATING:

Like other living creatures, man has to eat and drink to feed his body. Granted rice to keep the body alive, I pray to thank the King “Than Nong” who taught farming, many thanks for the favor of the goddess “Huyen Thien” who protects my life.

By borrowing this body, I expect to succeed in building an eternal life.

“Nam Mo Cao-Dai Tien Ong Dai Bo Tat Ma Ha Tat”.

PRAYERS AFTER EATING:

I pray to remember the farmer’s hard labor forever.

In my daily life each mouthful of rice is a favor which builds my body to produce.

May my body be strong enough to help the society.

I will obey the law of God’s Religion and love everybody.

And that is my decision.

“Nam Mo Cao-Dai Tien Ong Dat Bo Tat Ma Ha Tat.”

PRAYERS BEFORE GOING TO BED:

Through a day living with desires, I know that many misdeeds were done by myself. May God, my beloved father, make me avoid them.

Let my astral body rest in the silence of dreams.

Holy Spirits come and teach me through the dream, show me the way to Paradise, guide this earthly man close to the Divinity.

“Nam Mo Cao-Dai Tien Ong Dai Bo Tat Ma Ha Tat”.

Besides, there are prayers for the speaker before giving a speech, prayers for beginning a meeting for all participants, prayers when finishing a meeting and many other types of prayers read at marriage and funerals, prayers to call for divine help when facing sorrows, accidents, disease, etc.

TRAINING THE PHYSICAL BODY:

Besides the perfection of spiritual life by theological methods I notice another method similar to Yoga which is being applied to disciples of the lower rank to train the physical body. However, this method is not popular because it requires a permanent effort of both the mind and the physical body and a minimum spare time to practice. In my opinion, this practice aims to train the physical body of the disciple to get acquainted with mystic energy which will be granted later if the disciple proves himself able to receive it, the training also aims at giving the physical body enough endurance to sustain the orders coming abundantly from the mind when this part of a human being begins to perfect itself after an awakening. The nutrition of the physical body by the vegetarian diet is also one of the ways leading to this purpose. When the second body or the liaison between the soul and the physical body really tends to God, the disciple will feel a strange urging from his interior which obliges the physical body to do many things, to devote itself to others. If the physical body was not trained gradually before it would disobey the soul's will, it would prevent good thought from becoming good deed. Of course, no one can avoid the interior conflict or some spiritual conflicts of this type in daily life, but if the physical body was trained carefully by religious ways before, the violent intensity of the conflict would be harnessed easily by the soul's will, from tasks of the minor nature in individual life to important decisions solving human problems.

Chapter IV

SOME IDEAS OF UNIVERSALISM SCHOOL OF FIVE CLASSES

CaoDaism is a school of five classes, one can choose any of them to follow. The five classes are the five domains of activities in which the objects deal with:

- individual and family life in the society,
- national life in the international community,
- the perfection of human beings,
- man and his activities in the occult world,
- the enlightenment of all living beings.

Man is not an isolated individual, but an element in the family, the nation, the society, among mankind, among all living creatures in the universe; therefore, the five classes are not separate classes directed by five teachers with their own different methods, who must stand together because of some obligation. The five classes are directed by one teacher, he chooses students having the same tendency and eminence to one of these objects to classify them into one category and let them begin to study in the same class which is the first class of Cao-Daism. When the disciple wants to study in this school the teacher will guide him through the remaining spheres of the other four classes, at last the disciple will perceive that he is studying in one school without distinction of classes.

Perhaps you have seen that Caodaism differs from an association of religious reconciliation. Buddhism is no more a religion with all its special aspects standing by the side of Confucianism or Catholicism in the Cao-Dai house. The lessons taught in the five classes just mentioned lead in the same direction and therefore there is only one school to graduated student though there seem to be five classes to the beginner. Please, do not be concerned that why I began this chapter with the statement that “Cao-Daism is a school of five classes, one can choose any of them to follow”, and now in the conclusion state that there are not five classes. The five classes are one and the one is five, and of course not all Cao-Daist disciples can understand clearly the essence of this doctrine. Usually, in discussions with them you will find the eminence of some objects in their thoughts either because they think it is necessary to argue with you about certain topics or because they themselves consider certain objects the most important of all. Some people pay particular attention to the education of their children in the family and it seems they follow Cao-Daism for that purpose only, others like the arrangement of national affairs, the participation in political activities with the expectation of relying on the influence of the

Cao-Dai community to rebuild and improve national policy or at least, they can apply individually the essence of Cao-Dai doctrine in solving governmental affairs consistent with God's will and human will. They always have to harmonize God's power with human power in finding a solution for any minor individual job or great problems of national life.

Generally a disciple who had decided to fling himself into this sphere received tragic results for his physical body because of ideological conflicts with earthly governors who have real power and force on the surface of this earth and who tend to the material. It is rather easy to understand because through the last centuries, almost all governors were not new "Siddhartha Gotama" who left the royal palace pursuing the truth to come back to his throne later and ruled his people with the thinking and seeing of an illuminated man. From the social point of view, ambitious men often consider Cao-Daism as a fighting instrument to be destroyed or to rely on during a certain period, however, this is a question best left to the political scientist.

There are also disciples always pursuing the Cao-Dao doctrine for methods of training the man to be better. To them Paradise and Hell seem to be too far, man is more important and to perfect him is enough.

Again, other disciples pay attention particularly to their interior life, and seem to neglect the outer world. They can be incomprehensible elements to the sociologist or politician, but a theologian needs their presence in maintaining life on the surface of the earth, as necessary as the hand and brain producing food to feed the physical body.

At last, you may also find enlightened disciples – though in a small number – whose activities extend to all domains from individual, family life to society, national, international life to supernatural worlds, from life inside the earth, the mineral to plants and trees, animals, mankind to different ranks of spirits, demons, angels, holy spirits, etc. everywhere they exist. Their actions, their thoughts, their words, the peace radiated from them all effect the revolution, that means the maintenance and development of all living creatures.

The five categories of disciples above all go on the unique path under the guidance of past and present religious creators. Now God appears, He excludes differences and keeps the essence of all doctrines from all over the world to teach His followers with some revelations about God's Secret Plan which man, on the course of evolution, has arrived at a level able to accept and understand. The wall of distinction erected by people who follow religious founders is now being erased by God in the system of thought of Caodaist disciples.

God said in a divine message "Formerly the people of the world did not know each other and lacked means of transportation and communication, I then founded at different epochs five branches of the Great Way (Dai Dao).

“Nhon Dao”: The way of Confucius, Plato, Socrates.,

“Than Dao”: Chinese mythology, Egyptian mythology, Greek mythology, ...

“Thanh Dao”: Christianity.

“Tien Dao”: Taoism.

“Phat Dao”: Buddhism.

“Each based on the particular customs and traditions of the races who practiced them.

“Nowadays, all parts of the world are explored, humanity knowing itself better aspires to real peace. But because of the very multiplicity of these religions men do not always live in harmony. That is why I decided to unite all in one to bring them back to primitive unity. What is more the Holy Doctrines of these religions have been through the centuries denatured by the very persons charged with spreading them, to such a point that I have now taken the firm resolution to come to you myself to show the true way”.

We know that many people from all over the world are trying to reconcile human thoughts, they are messengers informing of God’s appearance in this Third Revelation. God’s presence is the essential element that decides the success of Cao-Daism. Formerly He directed a school of five classes, each of them was suitable for a certain region on the earth, now He is still doing the same things, He brings all people from all regions to put them close together into one school, He erases walls of separation between classrooms. He teaches all His disciples lessons suitable for each category, meaning the application of the truth for different domains. In such a vista He is no more my Master, or your Master but He is the Master of all.

Mankind will know that they formally studied with God through the image of His messengers and now He himself comes to so confirm. This is the essential difference between Cao-Daism – a religion created by God himself – and an association of religious groups working toward ecumenicity having the same purpose and which was formed by human efforts.

NATURAL ORDER IN HUMAN SOCIETY:

On the surface of this earth nothing is absolute. Everything was already planned by an everlasting natural order which is called PHAP/ Dharma. A child is born, grows up, becomes old and dies. No miracle can make a baby instantly become an old man by a blow and keep it alive forever, make it never die. Again, no power can make a baby – be able to think as wisely as an old man of eighty years. It needs the time to learn the experiences of wisdom from this society and that is an order of nature.

So is human society. God delivers each individual a soul or small illumination and gives the whole of mankind a great soul. Each small illumination needs the time to be brilliant, therefore the great soul of mankind also needs the time to become mature. That order, whether it has been accepted or not does exist forever, it participates silently in directing all earthly activities. An insolent child of the family was supposed to say that he had no father, he was naturally born, that he was the chief of the family, but whether he accepts the fact of having a father or not he does not have a father who must take care of him because he is his father. That is an order of nature.

God created mankind but there have always been and still are people who refuse to accept Him. Nevertheless He continues to grant the spiritual life and temporal life to everyone according to the law of equality because He is the Father, He acts like this. Although the spirit of mankind often is haughty and claims to be the chief of the universe, there must be a primitive source for its wisdom.

Fortunately, not everybody is so arrogant. If it was said that the wisdom that man possesses today was passed down as a cumulative result from many previous generations, that would be the order of procedure, the way to act on the phenomena and not the creative source. If it was said the essence comes from the material, the formation of atoms in material must also follow a certain order to exist, what power is so wise as to create the order in the moving of electrons in the formation of material? It is said that human society was always in progress and naturally man of primitive stages was not so wise as they are now, how can we understand that native tribesmen in North Russia or Red Indians in South America or prehistoric men anywhere in the world were really creators of the order in the moving of planets, of electrons, in fixing the positions of stars in the universe. Was it possible that such stupid minds of prehistoric men were the real authors of mystical creations which have not been understood completely by the wise minds of today's man?

Whether man accepts it or not, in the universe there must be a source of wisdom and that Great Wisdom knows itself how to create the order for the acts of everything, in which man is found as a particle. Although man, or more accurately beloved sons of God, tried to turn away from Him, to close their eyes and not see Him, to block their ears so as not hear about His source, although he looked for all ways to prevent his mind from thinking of the order already planned in the universe, whatever he did, man did take the source from God by that order. Suppose a child said that he had no father, no mother, that he was born from a crack in the earth, that he did not like to her any word about his parents, people know that he must have had a father and a mother. Whether man accepts it or not the source of the order already planned in the nature, the life and death, do come to him by that law.

The Cao-Daist disciple calls the source of that natural order God and the understanding about Him must follow an order to be clearer through the course of time. That is the reason

why there were necessary differences in the teaching – or more accurately, in the ways of expressing religious thoughts of the former founders – to a certain number of followers, in certain social circumstances, in a certain period of time there must be teaching adapted to them. The founders of religions were the same in their heart, but the followers were different in level of evolution, such an order needed differences in teachings. The sons of God who do not like to accept Him based on those differences to reject religious doctrines and the Cao-Daist disciple knows that human evolution must pass such epochs.

Chapter V

HARMONY BETWEEN THE LAITY AND THE FAITH

We have been said that Cao-Dai Church has two visible boards in its organization: the “Hiep Thien Dai” or Legislative Board and the “Cuu Trung Dai” or Executive Board. The “Hiep Thien Dai” is the soul of the Church, the “Cuu Trung Dai” is the temporal body of the Church. The disciple considers the Church as the symbol of God’s image on earth, therefore the two boards symbolize the essence and the substance of everything, every person. The harmony between the essence and the substance is vital for maintaining life on the surface of the earth. The following translation from the “Phap Chanh Truyen” explains the necessity for such harmony:

“The Divine Mechanism of Creation and Evolution involves two secrets: the form (Visible) and the non (Invisible). Observing the form is easy but studying the non is extremely difficult. A veil of secrecy separates the visible and the non. From the first day of the creation of the universe to now even the most illuminated people haven’t been able to pull aside the secret veil to look into the non for a complete observation, but fortunately, man has been granted a key which is the observation of the rapport between the form and the non in the activities of all things. The non and the form must be in accord to be suited to the Divine Mechanism of Creation and Evolution. In the universe there is the Yin and Yang (the positive and negative), in material there exist the shape and the essence animals have the astral and physical body, man has his spirit and temporal body, the formation of everything in the universe occurs by the accord between the substance and the essence. Due to the differences in the level of evolution among the essence or the soul of minerals, vegetables, animals, mankind, among the spirits of Angels, Saints, Buddha, God... each category takes a different form. Mineral is not like the vegetable, vegetable not like animal, animal not like man, man not like angel, angel not like saint, saint not like Buddha, Buddha not like God, the form and the spirit all are different.

“Material must obey the essence to form the shape. The proof exist in the variety of the conformity between the spirit and form in the human physical body, the wicked has some strange shape in his body, the good has some brilliance in his appearance, our ancestors observe the appearance to foretell our behavior. The physical body must agree with the spirit as the material agrees with the essence, the material is visible, the essence is invisible, the non and the form must be in accord, as a consequence we know the non by observing the form, we confirm the non by the form”.

On another occasion His Holiness Ho-Phap Pham Cong Tac gave a speech discussing one philosophical aspect of Cao-Daism, the reconciliation between spiritualism and materialism. He said:

“I also wanted to discuss the supernatural value of religion to reconcile all facts of the truth found in different doctrines, but being afraid that involving mystical supernaturalness could be beyond the listener’s judgment and as a consequence will become of no value, I then decided to take into consideration the reality of religious life in society to develop an ideology consistent with the present level of intellectual development of mankind in order to give some help to the seeker of the truth.

“The organs and activities of religions today seem to be too old to awake the society which offers no encouragement to the human spirit, no rules for human thought nor accord for thought and action, how can the society fail to become so tumultuous, how can it avoid being urged to follow the way to materialism with a complete disregard for the spirit’s ownership?

“How will man act in this earthen life when the mind has become so weak, the conscience so run down!?.

“We have to answer that natural law obliges each individual to pay attention particularly to his way of living. How important it is! If life exists only by material law man will live as low as the animals. It’s not necessary to argue about the great distinction between the spirit and material, the listener knows that material has its shape and so it is tired up, while the spirit is quite free, material has limitations but the spirit does not. We also understand that everything, whether small or big, must obey the Law to take its procedure of phenomena, saying that material has its origin there must be the possessor of that origin, saying that it has its shape, there must be the frame, in other words, material has its owner.

“Because of the right of ownership society is being urged to struggle so tumultuously and violently that the surface of this earth has been transformed into a battlefield.

“The life of an animal is expressed in living to eat, living to adobe, that is the law of living for mineral, for grass and vegetable, for plant and tree, for insect, bird, fish, for animals. People have hated each other, done harm to each other, killed each other because of the pursuit of material things. Contrarily, the spiritual life is originally self controlled, boundless, everlasting with time and space, that is the law of our late saints and sages. The life of an animal has the same meaning as two meals a day while the spiritual life is immeasurable. The animal type of living was founded at the stomach, the spiritual life at the mind, stomach and mind differ, the two ways of living differ. Although man has progressed to such as presently high level of intellectual development he hasn’t found any really satisfactory solution for this conflict between the two ways of living. It seems to us that the mind works harder when the stomach is empty and it becomes lazy when the stomach is full.

“Similarly, so far there haven’t been any religions which have had sufficient effective power to reconcile the material with the spiritual. Some religions tend to the non and neglect the form, they are parties of spiritualism, some tend to the visible neglecting the non, they become disciples of materialism. The two party types are trying to pour into the ears of others what is called right and wrong, coming from the variety of materialism and spiritualism. One side says that I only obey the material law, the others say that I rely on the miracle which come from the spirit, while the followers of the two ideologies are separated more and more distinctly. We may ask if there have been so far any religious founders who have had sufficient spiritual power, virtue and wisdom, to reconcile the two parties in order to make this society universal. If we try to think in the extreme silence of our mind we will see and dare confirm that such a dilemma is not a real conflict but it is an accidental argument of the predecessors.

“In the intellectual brilliance of the 20th century we perceive clearly the close rapport between the two organs, spirit and material, it seems to be strange to us this division between two spheres, the spirit in confrontation with the material, the non with the form. And if we go on questioning the reason why the distinction appeared, we will see that it was born from the thoughts in Confucianism and Taoism, and it was not really from the very mouths of Confucius or Lao-Tzu, it came from the doctrines of the two great philosophers’ followers. No power can take the intellect away from the human body to exist independent of it, no power dares to separate the non and the form. Spiritual and temporal bodies are two essential organs for human life, according to natural law they both have equivalent value, the body which loses the spirit will be crazy, the spirit which loses the body will be strange.

“Laity is the image of material, religion is the image of the Tao. Laity and religion are equivalent, the mechanism of creating this life requires the service of both laity and religion.

“Cao-Daism is a religion which takes conscience as foundation, it involves all doctrines in the world and serves as a mediatory place for the union of ideologies which is necessary for guiding man to perfection.

“Moreover, the natural law gave conscience the right of freedom of thought and you know that the thought always modifies with the variety of society to support the human mind in bettering life. If we agree that the Tao means the only way for human psychology we must accept that the spirit must be quite free in faith so long as religious activities support the laity and laity does not contradict religion, such is a sublime doctrine, able to bring peace to human psychology, peace in psychology will bring peace to society, peace in society will bring universality to every people.

“During the period when different nations in the world are unequal in progress, the civilized was found among the barbarous, good customs and traditions among bad ones, if we only take the value of what belongs to the visible of each nation as criteria for comparison it is not easy to unite races. Inequality of national property, differences between national situation require political variety, the attempt to realize a universal world by uniting nation with nation based on such a comparison does not guarantee success. We can say that bringing the value of what belongs to the visible of each country to the international balance in order to judge a country as high or low only causes more harm to society. I think that those who are pursuing materialism with the great hope of bringing to mankind the real peace are doing the same thing as trying to remove the moon to the earth in the universe, it is merely a way to deceive others, a malice to hold the authority.

“Only when mankind knows that humanity was not born to follow an animal type of living as happiness and realizes that he must respect the life of every living creature, love each other, help each other, support each other, feed each other, and considers these duties as a way of living will he attain the real happiness.

“Cao-Daism by its noble action and sublime ideology can promise that mankind will have such happiness”.

Applying that philosophy for solving human problems in the social circumstances of Viet-Nam the Cao-Daist disciple commits himself to an engagement to all activities in the family as in society, from material life such as food and clothes to the performance of sacraments and even discovering the secrets of nature by meditation and ecstasy to other planes for studying. All these activities concentrate on one purpose which is to support the mechanism of evolution of all created beings as a means to find a solution for the sorrow of life.

A politician, an economist, a sociologist, a soldier... each has his own way of solving the sorrow of life and they usually appeal to the Cao-Daist disciple to join their group to act and think as they do. In reality, because the action was oriented by the influence of religious philosophy, the disciple's solution for human sorrow is based on the harmony between material and spirit or in other words, they must at the same time satisfy the desires and requirements of temporal life without neglecting the doctrine which was produced originally by the spirit.

In individual life the tendency to offer the physical body permanent satisfaction of sensual desire and to neglect the spiritual life and the methods of training designed to wake up the sleeping soul in the body is not acceptable.

In family life the spiritual bankruptcy of ruining the Mencious Confucian doctrine, regardless of any splendid words of rationalization is not acceptable.

In national life a permanent hate, the killing of each other to maintain a ruling power plus a contempt of individual life which originally takes its source from God equally, and which has the divine right to exist is not acceptable.

In international life any administrative or economic domination expressed by seizing the distribution of food and the clothes with the purpose of obliging the acceptance of domination by power is not acceptable, it is also not acceptable to gradually kill the spiritual life by preventing its development.

During the period when the French still dominated Viet-Nam and the Cao-Daist disciple had the intention of standing up – an intention which succeeded when the nationalist groups seized temporary independence on March 9th, 1945, God taught as follows about the mutual love between the two peoples in a communication by “co but”:

“I would like to be united forever. The new doctrine that I teach aims at bringing you to one community of interest and living.

“Be united forever by my will and propagate the peace and mutual love to the whole world”.

The harmony between the spiritual and material is expressed most clearly in the Cao-Dai charitable policy. That is a special organization for economic life in the community tending to restrict the individual’s possessions on the principle that by love the disciple agrees to offer his possessions to the community to convert the covetousness of the wicked and thus help himself by increasing production, by having sufficient necessities to feed the physical body of all members of the community. The disciple devotes himself to serve all living creatures, the real title reserved for him is a servant for all sons of God.

They live in a community to build strength for the protection of their religious life, to have favorable conditions and sufficient means for the success of the spiritual perfections.

The Love and Equality are ideological principles of this policy, whenever and wherever these two elements are found to be lacking sociologists might see a formerly similar way of living but, it is not the Cao-Daist charitable policy.

A new organ was created four years ago, it aims at widening the activities of the Church into the social classes in direct connection with social affairs. This organ is named the “*Ban The Dao*” (Lay Committee), it is under the guidance of the “The” Branch (Temporal life) in the Legislative Board.

The expectation of realizing the harmony between the Tao and the laity was clearly expressed in a charter as follows:

“The *Ban The Dao*” is an organ for social affairs, having its source in the Church, which has duty of establishing liaison for an accord between the Church and society in order to build a peaceful life for humanity in this period which is nearing the end of evolutionary cycle”.

The four titles reserved for the disciple serving in this way are:

“Hien Tai”, “Quoc Si”, “Dai Phu”, and “Phu Tu”.

“Hien Tai” is the lowest rank of all. Dignitaries of the *“Ban The Dao”* are not required to leave their actual secular posts for a complete devotion to religious activities. Most members are intellectuals, businessmen, officers, politicians and famous personages. They have the duty to find efficient ways to support the Church activities within their own capacity. They are permitted to participate in all national activities in their own name or in the name of the Committee depending on each case and on personal preference.

Chapter VI

CONCLUSION

Is there a complete deliverance for religious man? This handbook will be concluded with such a topic. Does it guarantee a perfect success for the disciple going on the path that has just been presented?

Religion itself is surely a place, a means, to help man remove the restrictions of the earthly life in order to reach the goal which is complete deliverance for a human being. Nobody can grant us complete deliverance if we lack the effort from within ourselves. The Supreme Being or God only gives us the help to attain the goal but, the success or failure in accomplishing it depends on each individual. One teaching in Cao-Dai doctrine holds that if we do not make an effort to perfect ourselves God alone cannot bring us to Heaven. Decisive words from a preacher about guaranteed success when converting others to the religion result only in building a stable faith which is necessary condition for success and the success itself must result from successive efforts of our own with the help from external sources including mystical powers.

The path of the Cao-Daist disciple or that of other religious believers must be directed under that law.

Religion itself is not an obstacle to the progress of society but it is a way to accelerate the evolution of all living creatures. In the struggle for survival on the surface of the earth, many elements were lost at the same time as advantages appeared. The ever changing nature of the Creator always acts on everyone regardless of whether he becomes a religious man or not but, if a choice between regression and progression is given, then religion is a choice for a cumulative and progressive result, for more gains and less loss. It was created by supernatural minds of our predecessors and by the miracles of God to offer this society more rapid progress than it has had, and with more happiness in quantity and quality than the human race has ever really had. But unfortunately because man prefers to live for the present or past or future than for the eternity he often, for examples, agrees to two lost and three gained to get a net of one gained rather than, one lost and two gained to get a net of one gained. The lost to gained ratio of 2:3 (.667) is greater than the 1:2 ratio (.500) which results from following the religious way. Conversely, the gained to lost ratio of 3:2 (1.5) is less than the 2:1 (2.00) ratio of the religious path.

Consequently, the world is still overwhelmed with woe, inequality and absurdity. The path is merely a path, and the passenger is a real traveler. Deliverance begins at each step on the path, the complete goal lies at the end of the path.

The End