

A Posthumous Return from Exile: The Legacy of an Anticolonial Religious Leader in Today's Vietnam

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The 2006 return of the body Phạm Công Tắc, one of the founding spirit mediums of Caodaism and its most famous 20th century leader, re-awakened controversies about his life and legacy among Caodaists both in Vietnam and in the diaspora. This paper argues that his most important contribution lay in formulating a utopian project to support the struggle for independence by providing a religiously based repertoire of concepts to imagine national autonomy, and a separate apparatus of power to achieve it. Rather than stressing Tắc's political actions, which have been well documented in earlier studies (Blagov 2001; Bernard Fall 1955; Werner 1976), I focus instead on a reading of his sermons, his séance transcripts and commentaries, histories published both in Vietnam and in the diaspora, and conversations with Caodaists in several countries when the appropriateness of returning his body was being debated.

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On November 1, 2006, excited crowds in Tây Ninh gathered in front of the huge central gate to their sacred city, which had not been opened for half a century. The large octagonal tomb on the way to the Great Temple had been built for Phạm Công Tắc, Caodaism's most famous and controversial 20th century leader, and planned as his final resting place, but it had sat empty for decades. Now, news had come that the gate would be opened on this day to receive a funeral procession coming from Cambodia, bearing his remains in a dragon shaped carriage, where his body would be welcomed, celebrated with a full night of prayers and chanting, and then finally laid to rest.

Since his death, a larger-than-life-size statue had been erected on the balcony of the large saffron colored building that had been his office in the 1940s and 1950s, where he delivered sermons that still define the ideals of worship for Tây Ninh followers. Just below it, a colorful hologram showed an image of Jesus Christ when looked at from the

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front, an image of Buddha when looked at from his right and an image of Phạm Công Tắc when looked at from his left. This summarized a key doctrine of the Tây Ninh religious hierarchy: Phạm Công Tắc was a spiritual leader on the same order as Buddha and Jesus. It should be noted, however, that Tắc never made this claim himself, and that it might be contested not only by followers of other religions but also by Caodaists affiliated with other denominations.

The British historian Ralph B. Smith noted accurately that Phạm Công Tắc was “the most prominent, but not necessarily the most important”¹⁾ Caodai leader (Smith 1970a, 336), and his legacy is one both of extraordinary charisma and activism and also of divisive exclusions. The ambitious and articulate young spirit medium remained a controversial figure half a century after his death. Within the Caodai community, some 800 temples display his image facing the great altar and see him as the human being who came closest to achieving divinity. About 500 others display the image of Ngô Văn Chiêu, Nguyễn Ngọc Tương or some other leader instead of Phạm Công Tắc, and see him as an important medium in the early years who later tried to monopolize access to spiritual communication.

At the very moment when hundreds of Caodai followers thronged into the incense-choked courtyard to pay their last respects to him, debates were raging in Caodai temples around the world about whether this sudden return to the great temple at Tây Ninh was wise. Many Caodaists had anticipated the day that their leader’s body would be returned as a time when religious freedom would return to Vietnam, there would be a normalization of decades of state censure, and the religious leadership would follow the original constitution received in spirit séances. I had visited his tomb in Phnom Penh in 2004 and interviewed a group of dignitaries and followers there. They were aware of efforts by some in the Tây Ninh hierarchy²⁾ to bring him back to the stupa-like tomb erected for him decades before, but they said the time when that would be possible was still “very far away.” “Our leader would not want to return to Vietnam as it is today,” they told me. “He had to leave because of conflict between one Vietnamese brother and another. He asked King Sihanouk to let him stay in Cambodia until Vietnam was peaceful, unified and neutral.”

While thousands of people in Tây Ninh awaited his arrival with eager anticipation, there were also others—especially members of the overseas community—who were skeptical and even openly hostile to these plans. They said that bringing Phạm Công Tắc’s body home now would be putting the cart before the horse: His return was to mark the achievement of a full normalization of Caodaism in its relation to the present govern-

1) Ralph B. Smith, “An Introduction to Caodaism: Origins and Early History” originally published in 1970–71, reprinted in *Pre-Communist Indochina*, edited by Beryl Williams (2009, 115–130).

2) Notably Cardinal Tam, the highest-ranking member of the governance committee that works with the Vietnamese state.

ment. This full normalization would include the re-sanctification of the section of the Great Temple reserved for séance communications with the deities, and the re-opening of séances (forbidden since 1975) as the authorized pathway of communication between humanity and deities.³⁾

But in November 2006, none of these concessions had yet been made. The government of Vietnam was responding to pressures from the American government to “show progress” on issues of human rights and religious freedom, since 2004 when Vietnam was listed as a “country of particular concern.” Vietnam wanted to join the World Trade Organization (WTO). It was rumored that this might happen just before President George Bush visited Vietnam to attend the ASEAN meetings in Hanoi. On the day that the Presidential delegation landed, there was still no approval for the WTO, but the US government offered another concession: They removed Vietnam from the list of countries abusing religious freedom. One condition of this change was some immediate action to re-integrate once sanctioned religious groups. Phạm Công Tắc, after resting for 47 years in Cambodia, was suddenly allowed to return to be re-buried in his homeland.

How would Phạm Công Tắc have reacted to the challenge of this politically charged decision? Would his famously powerful spirit consent to this transfer of his bodily remains? Many skeptics argued that, once opened in Phnom Penh, his tomb would be revealed to be empty—perhaps because of looting by thieves looking for gold, or perhaps because this government scheme was pre-destined to fail. Others condemned the Tây Ninh Governance Committee for “collaborating” with the communist regime and playing into their strategy of masking continued suppression of religious organizations.

A Spirit Medium as Anti-Colonial Activist

The heavily polarized debates within the Caodai community which centered on this controversial return would be familiar to Phạm Công Tắc, who was the most politicized of Caodai leaders and the one most willing to be seen as a spokesman not only for the religious hierarchy but also for Vietnam’s nationalist aspirations. Misrepresented in most English language histories as the Caodai “Pope,” he fused religion and politics when he

3) One group of Texas based Caodaists apparently hoped to bring Phạm Công Tắc’s remains to Texas, where a new Caodai temple was planned, using the three million dollar jackpot that a Caodai follower in Dallas had won in the lottery. To persuade the King of Cambodia to oppose moving the remains back to Vietnam, they presented a large “gift” to charity at the royal court. Rumors of bribes to other ministers also circulated. But ultimately, the Vietnamese government pressure proved more powerful than dollars sent from overseas congregations.

attended the Geneva Conference in 1954 and tried in vain to prevent the partition of the country. A reading of official Vietnamese histories after 1975 presents him as the leader of a “reactionary and opportunistic organization with some religious overtones” (Blagov 2001).

I argue in this paper that Phạm Công Tắc’s most important contribution lay in formulating a utopian project to support the struggle for independence by providing a religiously based repertoire of concepts to imagine national autonomy, and a separate apparatus of power to achieve it.⁴ Rather than stressing Phạm Công Tắc’s political actions, which have been well documented in earlier studies (*ibid.*; Bernard Fall 1955; Werner 1976), I focus instead on a reading of his sermons, his séance transcripts and commentaries, histories published both in Vietnam and in the diaspora,⁵ and conversations with Caodaists in both countries when the appropriateness of returning his body was being debated.

Phạm Công Tắc was an important religious innovator, who created a new style of mediumistic séances and a new type of scripture. After many centuries of Sino-Vietnamese phoenix writing, his séances received messages not in Chinese characters traced in sand but in the Romanized cursive of *quốc ngữ*, a form of literacy which made it possible to receive dictation in both Vietnamese and French, and was thus supremely well adopted to the bicultural and bilingual milieu of the early spiritist circles of young colonial subjects educated in French language schools. As a spirit medium, however, he never claimed “authorship” of these innovations, which were all attributed to divine guidance. But the model that he presented for conversations with divinities, rather than serving as a simply vehicle (the “voice” or “hand” of the spirit dictating a message) was to have profound implications on Caodai doctrine.⁶ It developed in new directions over

4) This insight comes from conversations with Caodaists in California, France and Vietnam, and also from conversations with Jérémy Jammes in France in 2005, and the reading of his 2006 dissertation, a work that straddles Vietnamese and diasporic communities and contributed greatly to my understanding of Caodaism. “Le Caodaïsme: Rituels médiumiques. Oracles et exegeses, approche ethnologique d’un mouvement relierigieux vietnamien et de ses réseaux” [Caodaism: Mediumistic rituals, oracles and exegesis, an ethnographic approach to a Vietnamese religious movement and its networks] (2006b). Ph.D. thesis, Université Paris X Nanterre.

5) See Đỗ Văn Lý (1989); Đồng Tân (2006); Huệ Nhân (2005) (all in Vietnamese) and the article by the Australian scholar Trần Mỹ-Vân (2000), as well as the translations of Phạm Công Tắc’s sermons posted on line by Đào Công Tâm and Christopher Hartney at the website of the Sydney Centre for Studies in Caodaism (2007).

6) The goal of a religious visionary may in fact be somewhat more like the goal of a novelist, seeking not so much to change reality but to replace it—to offer another life, endowed with its own attributes, that is created to discredit real life, to offer an alternative to the mundane. These visions serve to “re-enchant” the world, to place it within a wider celestial framework, and to infuse it with meanings beyond those ordinarily perceived. Political utopias often disappoint because their goals cannot be reached during the lifetime of their proponents. Religious utopias, which always also project these goals onto another world, cannot be discredited by the same process.

the almost 35 years that he played a pivotal role in articulating Caodai teachings, and his subtle finessing of the issue of authorship was, I will argue, one of his most significant leadership strategies.

Phạm Công Tắc's career has sometimes been compared, both favorably and unfavorably, to that of M. K. Gandhi in India.⁷⁾ The unfavorable comparisons come from French archival documents in the early 1930s, which note their fear that "This person threatens to be another Gandhi." Like Gandhi, Phạm Công Tắc tried to use "Orientalism" (a western discourse about the differences between East and West) against empire, but the ways in which he did so balanced uneasily between asserting the powerful, progressive dynamics of an Asian "yang" (*duong*, associated with the left eye) perspective and integrating elements of Europeanized Christianity into a new universal doctrine. They also present a challenge to the ways in which religion and politics have been studied in the postcolonial world.

Religion and Postcolonial Theory

One of canonical texts of postcolonial studies, Homi Bhabha's "Signs Taken for Wonders," begins with an extended description by an Indian native missionary of the effects of distributing copies of the Hindi Bible in 1817 under a tree outside Delhi. Excited by finally being able to read the words of God directly, in their own language, virtually everyone wanted a copy of the book, and soon they had formed their own party, all dressed in white, to implement its teachings. But they refused to take the sacrament, since they had read that it was eating the blood and body of Christ, and they knew that Christians ate cow flesh. They explained to the frustrated missionary that they could never become so unclean. In the same year, another missionary lamented that although everyone wanted a Bible, some saw it as a curiosity, others as a source of income, and some even used it for waste paper. As soon as the Holy Book was made accessible to them in their own language, Bhabha argues, it became "ready for a specific colonial appropriation" (Bhabha 1994, 104).

Religious movements—identified with transcendent ideas of unity, infused with

7) Virginia Thompson, an American scholar, was the first to develop this comparison in English in *French Indochina* (1937). Ralph Smith, a British scholar, speculated about Gandhi's influence in *Viet-Nam and the West* (1968, 75), in his 1970–71 article "An Introduction to Caodaism I: Origins and Early History" (1970a) and posthumously collected papers *Pre-Communist Indochina* (2009, 117). He also noted the possibility that another Indian self-sufficient community, Tagore's Santiniketan, might have been an inspiration (1968, 75).

moral authority and a search for justice, offering access to divine knowledge—have often been the focus of ideological battles, and even bloody military ones, in the colonial context. Yet postcolonial theory has paid little attention to religion, as noted in a recent history of postcolonialism: “The field is distinguished by an unmediated secularism, opposed to and consistently excluding the religions that have taken on the political identity of providing alternative value-systems to those of the west” (Young 2001, 338; see also Chakrabarty 2000).

Caodaism has often been called “the least understood of all Vietnamese movements of the 20th century” (Popkin 1979, 193; see also Wolf 1968; Smith 1970a; 1970b; Taylor 2001; Woodside 2006). Stereotyped as a “traditionalist movement,” which “rose out of the mystical depths of the Mekong Delta,” and consisted of peasants “merely waiting for the will of Heaven to change, at which point (so they were convinced) the French would disappear and all the Vietnamese would become Cao Dai or Hoa Hao” (Fitzgerald 1972, 59), it has been wrongly associated with passivity. I argue that one of the key innovations of exoteric Caodaism was its activism, its forging of new ideas of citizenship and personal purity which fused what Bhabha calls “colonial appropriation” with new organizational forms and an anti-colonial agenda.

Phạm Công Tắc was the figure most identified with fusing national aspirations and religious teachings in Vietnam. He fashioned a modernist millenarianism designed to develop a new kind of agency, giving the Vietnamese people the confidence that they could change the course of history and were, in fact, destined to do so. Drawing on the power of older prophecies that “One day, a country now in servitude will become the master teacher of all humanity” (Hương Hiếu 1968, 242), Caodai teachings identified the left eye of God (Thiên Nhân) with dynamism, progression and modernity (*duong*), upsetting Orientalist clichés and encompassing Jesus into an Asian pantheon by designating him as the son of the Jade Emperor. Born in the urban spaces of Saigon, Cholon and Gia Dinh, Caodaism became the largest mass-movement in French Indochina by building a following in the same areas as the Indochina Communist Party, and functioning at times as a political force in itself (Werner 1980). But rather than arguing (as some French observers did) that this was a “party masquerading as a religion,” I will try to place Caodaism instead within the ethnographic record of new religions that promote the emblems, narratives, and technologies of modern nation states.

Building on Phạm Công Tắc’s autobiographic reflections and writings, I present a case that links stagecraft (Phạm Công Tắc’s dramatic presentations in ritual) to statecraft (creating “Vietnam” as an autonomous religious space, “a state within a state”). This utopian project supported the struggle for independence by providing a new repertoire of concepts for imagining nation independence, and a separate apparatus of power

to try to achieve them.⁸⁾

Caodaism's formation of an alternative apparatus of power can be seen to have a kinship with other indigenous movements against occupying states, like the Native American prophet Handsome Lake, who led a Seneca millenarian group and claimed to have conversed in a trance with George Washington, speaking at Washington's house as the First President played with his dog on the veranda (Kehoe 1989). By incorporating and appropriating certain elements of the power of the colonial masters, religious leaders create a competitive model that derives its persuasive force from its capacity to both imitate and assimilate other forms of power. By including and transforming the messages of Victor Hugo and Jeanne d'Arc, the Caodai Holy See mirrored to French colonial power the imagined modern nation that its construction was to bring into being. Its master planning, its intricate administrative hierarchy is proof of this new religious movement's ability to create something new, to capture modernity in both its Asian and European aspects—its institutions, forms of knowledge, modes of power, and radiant future—by means of its likeness. The copy itself becomes an original, a new model for a new order of being.

Phạm Công Tắc's career should not, however, be taken as the prototype for all of Caodaism. Many contemporary Caodaists express ambivalence about Phạm Công Tắc's later political prominence, although they all acknowledge his importance during the formation of the new religion. As Đồng Tân (2006), one of his most stringent critics, notes "He was the main person that God used during the early years of the Great Way." But signs of schism began very early, because of what some critics have called Phạm Công Tắc's "strong personality," his efforts to establish exclusive religious authority and his efforts to use spirit messages to mobilize the masses against colonial rule.⁹⁾

One Caodai historian has argued that Phạm Công Tắc "wanted to be Richelieu to Bảo Đài's Louis 13th, serving as a religious advisor to a secular king" (Đỗ Văn Lý 1989). Others claim, even more critically, that he came to imagine himself more like Louis 16th: "Le Caodaisme, c'est moi"—eclipsing the ideal of spreading mystical enlightenment

8) See also the following works by Jérémy Jammes on this topic: "Caodaism and Its Global Networks: An Ethnological Approach of a Vietnamese Religious Movement in Vietnam, Cambodia and Overseas" (2009) and "Le Saint Siège Caodaïste de Tây Ninh et le Médium Phạm Công Tắc (1890–1959): Millénarisme, prosélytisme et oracles politiques en Cochinchine" [The Tây Ninh Holy See and the medium Phạm Công Tắc (1890–1959): Millenarianism, proselytizing and political oracles in Cochinchina] (2006a).

9) His critics within Caodaism do not deny his charismatic powers, but instead argue that his own spirit became too strong to be a vessel for God's messages. Reports of Phạm Công Tắc successfully healing patients with his hands and exorcizing evil spirits (Đồng Tân 2006, 44–46) are presented to show how he followed a mystical formula established by older religious traditions (*huyền thoại cựu giáo*) which was not consistent with the modern form of Caodaist teachings (*ibid.*, 49).

through the fold and monopolizing contact with the divine to specially trained mediums in a college of mediums designated with his own patronym (Đông Tân 2006, 46). At the same time that some of his followers identify him as a reincarnation of Jesus (Chong 2000) or Buddha (Danny Phạm 2006), others argue that he corrupted the original intent of the Caodai Religious Constitution (which he himself received as a medium and published) and compromised the faith by tying it to political and military agendas.

Tắc's Public and Private Life: History and Autobiography

Phạm Công Tắc was born on June 21, 1893, in Binh Lap village, Chau Thanh, in Long An, where his father was working as a minor official for the colonial administration. He was the eighth of nine children, and since his father was Catholic, he was baptized as a baby, although his mother was Buddhist (Trần Mỹ-Vân 2000, 3). Phạm Công Tắc described his father as an official in the French colonial administration, who achieved a good position but “objected strongly to the authorities when they were unjust” (Sermon #18, Jan 6, 1949, 56). He was fired when Phạm Công Tắc was four years old, forcing him to work as a trader in order to support the family, “a herd of children in a very ragged nest.” As the youngest son, Phạm Công Tắc described himself as “the one who remained with the parents because the second to last must stay with family,” and the youngest child was a daughter. He remembered a childhood in which he played the peacemaker in the family, trying to persuade his older brothers and sisters not to quarrel.

He was a good student, attending Catholic schools and appearing healthy, but also prone to long, deep sleeps, sometimes accompanied by fever and strange visions. His mother was greatly disturbed by this condition and tried unsuccessfully to find a cure (Trần Mỹ-Vân 2000, 3). His father died when Phạm Công Tắc was 12 years old, and he remembered childhood fears that his mother would also die soon. At 16, he was accepted to study at the prestigious French Lycée Chasseloup Laubat in Saigon. There he became involved in nationalist student politics, and particularly the Travel to the East Movement (Phong Trào Đông Du) spearheaded by Phan Bội Châu. After the Japanese defeated the Russians in 1905, the Japanese independent path to modernity inspired a number of Vietnamese nationalist leaders, including the exiled Prince Cường Để and Phan Bội Châu, who wanted to send a new generation of students to Japan to have “both their minds and their vision transformed” (*ibid.*, 4). Phạm Công Tắc was selected to go in the fourth group, and received financial sponsorship to pursue studies in Japan to train him for eventual leadership in organizations seeking Vietnamese independence.

But French Sûreté forces caught wind of the scheme and raided its Saigon headquar-

ters, capturing documents in which Phạm Công Tắc's name was listed as a scholarship recipient. Fearing arrest, Phạm Công Tắc fled the city and went to live with his grandparents in An Hò village, Trảng Bàng district, Tây Ninh Province. He realized that his chances for study overseas were doomed because the French had signed an alliance with the Japanese, expelling Phan Bội Châu and all other Vietnamese nationalist students. In 1949, 40 years later, Phạm Công Tắc would speak with some regret of "those children of upper class families who are fortunate enough to be able to study overseas" (Sermon #24, Feb 27, 1949, 76), and that experience seems to have left a bitter taste in his mouth which developed into a strong commitment to nationalist struggle. His sermons do not, however, include any direct reference to the educational opportunities he first enjoyed and then saw cut short because of his political activism.

Expelled from his prestigious lycée, Phạm Công Tắc completed his studies in Tây Ninh and returned to Saigon to work as a waiter at the famous Continental restaurant. He met the Chief of the Customs Office who came in to order a meal and impressed him with his fluent French. In 1910, he was hired to serve as this Chief's private secretary, and began a career as a civil servant (Đồng Tân 2006, 36). He also studied traditional Vietnamese music and performed at times with the "Pathé" folk singing group.

Phạm Công Tắc was married to Nguyễn Thị Nhiều on May 30, 1911, and soon became a father. He later spoke of working from the age of 17 to support his family, eventually choosing government service because his brother-in-law advised him that there was "no honor" in working in commerce (Sermon #18). Phạm Công Tắc remembers his mother's death when he was 22, while his wife was pregnant, and says his grief at that time was relieved only by the thought that she "entered into the spiritual form of the Great Divine Mother" (Sermon #20, Jan 16, 1949, 62). Without parents, he became attached to his brother-in-law ("I loved him more than my blood brother") and his younger sister, but both of them also died within a few years. His sorrow at the loss of family members was not assuaged until he received "a touch of enlightenment" and followed the Supreme Being who "delivered a profound love to me, a love a million times more rewarding than the love of a family" (Sermon #18, 57).

Phạm Công Tắc and his wife eventually had eight children, six of them dying in childhood (Đồng Tân 2006, 36), but these personal losses of descendants are not mentioned in his sermons. Nor does he make any explicit reference to the fact that the two children who did survive were daughters, thus depriving him of any direct descendants in the Phạm line. Some commentators have implied that his creation of the "Phạm Môn" or secret medium's college (the name can be interpreted as "Buddha's gateway" or as his own family name) was in part a way of ensuring his spiritual legacy would live on, even if he did not produce any human sons (*ibid.*).

There are also suggestions that he blamed the French for his loss of sons who could carry on his descent line. Phạm Công Tắc worked for the French office of Customs and Monopolies, first posted to Saigon, then Qui Nhon, and then back in Saigon. Werner notes:

After working as a clerk for 18 years, his “penchant for spirits,” (as the comment in his Sûreté file dryly put it) and involvement in Caodaism was discovered, at which point he was abruptly transferred from Saigon to Phnom Penh, and perhaps demoted. This was evidently a hard blow since he was seeking care for a sick child in Saigon who later died (Werner 1976, 96, citing Lalaurette and Vilmont, “Le Caodaisme” 1931, 62–63— I note the French article refers to a son, *un enfant*).

Phạm Công Tắc was transferred in 1926, and finally decided to quit his job in Phnom Penh without giving notice in 1928 to devote himself full time to his religious duties at the Holy See in Tây Ninh. His French superior described him as “intelligent but unstable.”

In Qui Nhon, Phạm Công Tắc helped establish a literary journal (*Văn Dân Thị Xã*) in the period 1915–20, publishing a number articles under the pen name Ái Dân (“He who loves the people”). In Saigon, he wrote for two other Vietnamese periodicals (*Nông Cổ Mìn Đàm* in 1907, *Lục Tinh Tân Văn* in 1908) as well as the French language *La Voix Libre* (1907) and *La Cloche Felée*, all of them critical of the colonial government. One article published in *La Cloche Felée* in 1907 was titled “Illegitimate Grandeur, Rebellion in the Lower Ranks” and appeared alongside the writings of Nguyễn Ái Quốc, the future Hồ Chí Minh (Jammes 2006b, 184). Similar critiques of colonial abuses were later found in spirit messages Phạm Công Tắc received from Victor Hugo and other French literary and historical figures.

The Birth of a Spirit Medium: Intimate Séances in Saigon

In 1925, at the age of 32, Phạm Công Tắc formed a spiritist circle with a well known poet and musician, Cao Quỳnh Cư and his nephew, Cao Hoài Sang, who also worked at the Customs office in Saigon. Initially, they were simply intrigued by the European vogue of spiritism, and interested in experimenting with it in the hopes of improving their own literary productions, finding a poetic muse among the immortals to inspire their verses. “Being poetic, and holding deep in their hearts a resentment of living in a conquered nation, the trio indulged in the pleasure of evoking spirits, tipping the table to raise questions about the country’s future and to compose and exchange poetry as a pastime,” as Hương Hiếu, Cư’s wife and the fourth person at the séances, was to recall (Hương Hiếu 1968, 6). Phạm Công Tắc was, by his own account, the most skeptical among them, since at first he held “no faith or belief at all,” and was simply curious to test the existence of the unseen world (Sermon #18, Jan 6, 1949, 2).

They used the same method as Victor Hugo in his posthumously published transcriptions of spirit séances (*Chez Victor Hugo: Les Tables Tournantes de Jersey*, 1923)¹⁰: Spirits were supposed to shake the table and cause it to rap the floor, with each successive rap indicating a letter of the alphabet. The first message, given as a poem, came from Cao Quỳnh Cư's father, who had died 27 years ago, and the second, five days later, from a local girl who had died before marrying. After confirming her identity by finding her tomb, the three spiritists adopted her as their spiritual sister. On the third session, a strange message came in the form of a riddle about hot pepper ("the more one thinks of it, the hotter it is"), and the spirit, when asked his age, began to beat the floor so violently the raps could not be counted. Phạm Công Tắc was disturbed by this response, and wanted to cut off the séance, and challenged the spirit to state where he lived. The spirit answered: "My house is a dark blue cloud, and my vehicle is a white crane. I orchestrate the Đạo through the instrument of humanity, and bless my disciples so that love may abound" (Hương Hiếu 1968, 6, translated in Bùi and Beck 2000).

These cryptic answers hinted at a higher level of philosophical discourse, however, so the three became more respectful, and followed this spirit's instructions to prepare a banquet at the time of the autumn moon (Tết Trung Thu) to welcome the Mother Goddess (Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu) and nine female immortals to dine with them. For five months, this spirit answered to the name of A Ẫ Ậ, the first three letters of the Vietnamese alphabet. On Christmas Eve, he revealed himself to be the Jade Emperor, also known as Cao Đài, "the highest tower," who had come to found the "Great Way of the Third Universal Redemption" (Đạo Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ).

The fact that the Supreme Being chose to disguise his identity by using the first three letters of the Romanized alphabet is enormously significant, and marks a key linkage between the "print capitalism" that Benedict Anderson (1991) saw as so important to the emergence of nationalist ideas of an "imagined community," and what could be called "print spiritualism" that swept early 20th century Vietnam (McHale 2003). The transformation in the forms of literacy and mass communication due to the French conquest was seen as opening the way for a new spiritual technology which would permit contact not only with the great spirits of the Asian tradition (who dictated their messages

10) Hugo described the spirit séances as "those works willed by me to the twentieth century" (Chambers 1998, 180), which would be "probably the basis of a new religion" once they were published. The séances held on the island of Jersey for several months in 1854 were published in 1923, almost 50 years after Hugo's death, because "the spirit of Death" had advised him to space out his posthumous works so that he could "say while dying, you will awaken me in 1920, in 1940 . . . in the year 2000" (*ibid.*, 178–179). Hugo also predicted that by the time these transcripts appeared, "it will be discovered that my revelation has already been revealed" (*ibid.*, 180). Caoadaists interpret these writings as prophesying the emergence of their new faith 75 years in the future.

by tracing Chinese characters in sand) but also with those of the European West (who wrote in alphabetic cursive).

Caodaism is the first revealed religion to use a Romanized version of an Asian language for its teachings (*quốc ngữ*), and its syncretistic beginnings express already, in the new form of literacy that they employ, the profound transformations of the world of the Vietnamese literati at the beginning of the 20th century. Phạm Công Tắc himself seems initially to have been more at ease in reading and writing French than Vietnamese, as the skillful versions of alexandrine verse that he penned while communicating with the spirit of Victor Hugo and other French luminaries might indicate.¹¹ In the first séances, the chief medium was Cao Quỳnh Cư, who had written a number of well-known songs and was suspected by French agents of “ghostwriting” (in a very literal sense) the verses received from the spirits of the dead (Lalaurette and Vilmont 1931). Convinced by the revelations of details unknown to the participants, Phạm Công Tắc soon became “engrossed and enthralled” in the séance sessions, and learned to be a talented and receptive medium as well.

In January 1926, the Jade Emperor sternly announced to his disciples that this was not a parlor game or an idle pastime, and he would instruct them in the Đạo and in their own responsibilities. In December, he had told them to borrow a phoenix basket (*ngọc cò*), a device used for many centuries in Chinese spirit writing, in order to receive his messages more quickly. “Flying phoenix” writing, also known as *phò loan*, “serving the mythological loan bird” traditionally uses a beaked basket or winnow held by two mediums to trace Chinese characters in sand (Clart 2003; Jordan and Overmyer 1986; Lang and Ragvald 1998) and enjoyed a resurgence in the second half of the 19th century in both China and Vietnam (Kelley 2007).

Phạm Công Tắc and his companions borrowed a basket from Âu Kiệt Lâm, the founding medium of Minh Lý Đạo, and this became the primary instrument for future spirit communications. Âu Kiệt Lâm was half-Chinese, and able to read and record messages in both Chinese and Vietnamese, but Tắc and other members of his generation received their messages only in *quốc ngữ*, and—increasingly, for Tắc, in French. Employing the language of the colonial masters in order to criticize them with a technology—spiritism—that also had its origins in Europe was to become the most distinctive characteristic of

11) A 1931 Sûreté report contains this ambivalent recognition of Phạm Công Tắc’s literary skills: “He has a gift for poetry: he makes up verses in *quốc-ngữ* and in French in the style of Victor Hugo and he sometimes manages to capture the rhythm, the image, the alexandrine line of the poet. Inspired by the Great Romantic, he transmits to the Hiệp Thiên Đài messages from the beyond relayed to him by the beaked basket.” The Parisian scholar Trần Thu Dũng (1996) has published a literary analysis of Hugo’s messages received by Phạm Công Tắc.

the séances which Phạm Công Tắc was soon to lead, after the death of Cao Quỳnh Cư in April 1929.

Establishing Ties to Other Leaders: The Esoteric-Exoteric Division

On Christmas Eve, the coming of the revelation of the Third Redemption was preceded by an “introduction” by the spirit of Lý Thái Bạch, the Tang dynasty poet whose immortal poetry and heavy drinking had earned him fame in ancient China. He quickly assumed the position of a master of ceremonies of the séances, introducing others and passing on instructions from the Supreme Being, and was later to be designated as the “Invisible Pope” (*Giáo Tông Vô Vi*) of the great way. His presence was a clear “Sinicizing” of Caođai séances, which came to assume the characteristics of a younger generation of mediums educated in French language schools kneeling before the sages of Asia, and soon Europe as well, awaiting instruction and guidance. Authoritative discourse flowed down from distant centuries, but many of the instructions were practical ones about how to organize a more open, worldly and activist version of the earlier secret societies that had suffered from French repression.

The Saigon spiritists were instructed to go to visit two prominent city residents: The secular materialist Lê Văn Trung, a once successful entrepreneur known for his fondness for wine, women and opium, who had served as the only Vietnamese member of the Conseil Supérieur de l’Indochine, and the ascetic mystic Ngô Văn Chiêu, who was reported to have had a vision of the Left Eye of God (Thiên Nhãn) on the island of Phú Quốc.

Phạm Công Tắc’s animosity to those who supported French colonial rule was so intense that he later admitted that he disliked Lê Văn Trung, and was reluctant to visit his home even after being instructed to do so in a spirit séance: “Lê Văn Trung met regularly with people in the French government, the only Vietnamese able to reach such a position. . . . I could not tolerate him. I could never be a mandarin for the French powers after our country was taken away from us. So when we brought the phoenix basket to him, we were just following orders from the Supreme Being” (Trần Mỹ-Vân 2000). Lê Văn Trung was known for his hostility to religion, but he had attended a number of earlier séances where he had received messages from Lý Thái Bạch which had encouraged him to believe that he could be cured of his failing vision. Suddenly, as the phoenix basket began to move, Lê Văn Trung found that his eyesight was restored, and the Supreme Being instructed him: “Now you can see, and you should remember why you have become able to see!” Lê Văn Trung became a Cao Đài disciple immediately,

and was soon divinely appointed as a Cardinal (*Đầu Sư*) and afterwards as Interim Pope. He was also able to rid himself of his opium habit and commit to a new life of vegetarian diet and religious discipline.

Ngô Văn Chiêu was a respected scholar who had served as the District Officer on Phú Quốc and was known for his high moral standards and years of attendance at Taoist syncretist séances. Ngô Văn Chiêu told the younger spiritists about his vision, in which the Left Eye appeared in the sky at the same time as the moon, the north star and the rising sun, and showed them the altar he had constructed in his home to worship the Jade Emperor using this image. Following instructions they received at the séance with Ngô Văn Chiêu, the Saigon spiritists established a similar altar in Lê Văn Trung's home, and on the evening of Tết 1926, they received an official message from the Jade Emperor, opening up the Great Way of the Third Universal Redemption (*Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ*).

Since Ngô Văn Chiêu had received the first sign, he is still considered “the first disciple” of Cao Đài, but he quickly withdrew from efforts to organize it as a mass movement. Offered the position of Pope in a séance, he declined to accept it, seeing this offer as yet another worldly temptation which would keep him from immersing himself in the spiritual search that was most important. Instead, he retired to Cần Thơ, where he instructed a few other disciples in what came to be known as the “esoteric branch” (*phái vô vi*, also called *nội giáo tâm truyền*). He was never to write down any doctrine or teaching, and practiced only in the classic Taoist fashion, by speaking personally to a few students who then passed on his teachings only to those who observed the most stringent ascetic restrictions (complete vegetarianism, celibacy, long daily meditation sessions).

Caodaism in its exoteric branch (*phổ độ* or *ngoại giáo công truyền*) was to go completely in the opposite direction: Demonstration séances were organized to recruit thousands of new members, more relaxed rules (10 vegetarian days a month) were established for most of the disciples, and intensive proselytizing was begun to provide salvation to millions before the impending end of present world. Lê Văn Trung's conversion galvanized hundreds of others to follow suit, and soon a very large number of civil servants, notables and teachers had joined the new faith. In October 1926, Lê Văn Trung presented an official declaration, signed by 28 disciples—employees of the colonial administration, teachers and businessmen, all of them educated and several of them very wealthy—to Governor Le Fol, asking that Caodaism be formally recognized as a new religion in Cochinchina. Le Fol was courteous but non-committal, and later visited the home of Ngô Văn Chiêu to participate in a private séance to see how spiritism worked (*Đồng Tân* 1967). But the gesture made in this declaration was a revolutionary one: It brought together a coalition of hundreds of secret societies, which had practiced esoteric arts in the shadows and under the threat of French investigations, out into the public sphere, and claimed the

protection of the law based on French ideas of religious freedom.

While Lê Văn Trung, a respected government figure in his 60s, was the nominal head of this movement (described—wrongly—in colonial documents as its “creator”), he was upstaged in many ways by Phạm Công Tắc, whose flamboyant leadership of the spirit séances and announcement of doctrinal innovations drew increasing attention to himself. In 1931, the French colonial officer Lalaurette identified Phạm Công Tắc as “the indomitable driving force behind Caodai occultism at the Holy See and the instinctive adversary to everything that is French,” and the real behind the scenes force defining its political direction. Phạm Công Tắc was credited with “intelligence and generally wide knowledge” (and seen as more dynamic than the by then ailing Lê Văn Trung), but mocked as an “ex-petty clerk” who aspired to dress in “feudal robes.”

The first photograph that we have of the Saigon spiritists shows a group of young men and women dressed in western clothing. The mysterious spirit A ã ã instructed his disciples to dress in *áo dài* tunics for worship, but Phạm Công Tắc apparently showed up in something much more elaborate, since an early séance text has the Supreme Being chortling gently on his arrival, speaking to him in the tones that an indulgent father might well take to his rather flamboyantly dressed son: “*Laughing: Perhaps he managed to get himself that costume as an opera performer, but he is so poor. I as his Teacher do not understand*” (Tòa Thánh Tây Ninh 1972a, *Thánh Ngôn Hiệp Tuyển*, 36). The chatty intimacy of the conversations these young mediums had with the Jade Emperor underscores the ways in which a distant ruler of the universe was brought closer, addressed in a personal and parental role, transforming the abstract doctrines of the “Great Teachings” into a new Asian monotheism in which the ascension of the dynamic, masculine power of the Left Eye was linked to the end of the colonial era and a New Age of self-determination for formerly subjugated peoples.

Phạm Công Tắc was divinely appointed to be the Hộ Pháp, “Defender of the Faith,” a guardian figure often represented near the entrance to Buddhist pagodas. His choice of a warrior’s costume was dictated in part by this title, but influenced by his sense of dramatic performance, as suggested by a French observer:

He knows perfectly well that if he is to strike the imagination of the adherents who listen to him, he must comport himself in imposing mandarin dress, so he has chosen a costume from the tradition of Sino-Annamite theater, the costume worn by a conquering general. He even wears the sword, and there he is, primed mentally and physically to play a role in the new religion: the Hộ Pháp, Grand Master of Rites and of Justice and Chief of the Corps of Mediums! (Lalaurette and Vilmont 1931)

The costumes of each Caodai dignitary and the duties of her or his office, are specified in the *Pháp Chánh Truyền*, which Phạm Công Tắc compiled, translated and published as

the Caodai Religious Constitution. This document is composed of a series of séance messages received at the inauguration ceremony held at the Gò Kén Pagoda in Tây Ninh province in 1926. The divine text is supplemented by explanations and commentaries by the Hộ Pháp, which record not only the instructions he received, but also—amazingly—his own reservations and occasional efforts at insubordination. From this document, it is very clear that instead of simply serving as the vehicle for spirit writing, Phạm Công Tắc became a direct interlocutor in these conversations. For this reason, his influence upon the divine charter of the faith is much greater than that of Lê Văn Trung or any other of the founding disciples.

In a section that would soon become the focus of controversy, the Hộ Pháp asks his divine interlocutor to explain the role of the Pope as the “elder brother” (*anh cả*) :

“According to the teachings of Catholicism, the Pope has full power on the bodies and the spirits. Because of this extensive power, Catholicism has much material influence. If today, you remove part of the power on the spirits, I fear that the Pope would not have enough authority in guiding humanity to conversion.” His Master answers, smiling: “That was mistake on my part. When I carried a physical body, I gave to an incarnated person the same authority on the spirits as myself. He climbed on my throne, took over the supreme powers, abused them and rendered man slave of his own body. Moreover, I did not realize that the precious powers I gave you because I loved you represented a knife with double edges that encouraged you to generate disorder among yourselves. Today, I am not coming to take these powers back but rather to destroy their deleterious effects. . . . The best way is to divide those powers so as to prevent dictatorship. . . . Once these powers belong to the hands of one, man escapes only rarely from oppression.” (Tòa Thánh Tây Ninh 1972c, *Pháp Chánh Truyền*, Bùi trans. 2002, 17)

Phạm Công Tắc, a young man baptized and raised in the Catholic Church, argues for a centralized Pope, who could provide effective leadership, and he is told that the errors made in designing the Catholic hierarchy need to be rectified by a more clearly defined separation of powers, in a complexly structured spiritual bureaucracy.

In a later section, Phạm Công Tắc challenges his interlocutor, who had decreed that Caodaism would establish equal rights for female and male dignitaries, by asking why, if this was the case, women were not able to become Censor Cardinals (*Chưởng Pháp*) or Pope (*Giáo Tông*). The Supreme Being answers: “Heaven and Earth possess two constitutive elements, yin and yang (*âm-dương*). If yang dominates, everything lives, if the yin rules, everything dies. . . . If a day came when the yang disappeared and the yin reigned, the universe would fall into decay and be destroyed. . . . If I allow the female college to hold the power of Pope in its hands, I will be sanctioning the triumph of yin over yang, so that the holy doctrine will be brought to nothing” (*ibid.*, 119). Even after this strict correction, the Hộ Pháp presses once again for an explanation for an apparent

inconsistency in the doctrine of sexual equality, and the divine master answers angrily “The Law of heaven is thus set down,” closing off discussion and leaving the séance abruptly.

Both of these passages suggest that Phạm Công Tắc wished to introduce a number of European influenced ideas (a centralized ecclesiastical hierarchy, women’s rights) into a more traditional Confucian spiritual bureaucracy headed by Lý Thái Bạch as the “great immortal” (Đại Tiên) administering a complex administrative apparatus. The young man in his 30s who wanted to train in Japan as a soldier for the revolution is told in no uncertain terms that he must learn patience and incorporate a more nuanced and gradualist perspective on changing the world. But, as events soon showed, schisms and defections soon placed Phạm Công Tắc in a position to bypass the counsel he received from the ancient Chinese masters and seek further advice from French writers and heroines who would support his innovations.

Schisms and Sanctions: The Road to the Eighth Decree

The three-day festival held to inaugurate the “Great Way” in 1926 eventually stretched on, in Caodai legend, to almost three months, and attracted a huge number of pilgrims, on lookers and new converts, including the visits of thousands of Cambodians who crossed the border to kneel in front of a huge statue of Buddha-Sakyamuni on a white horse. Almost immediately, government sanctions were imposed to limit its expansion, with French colonial officers denying permits for the construction of new temples, and the Cambodian king calling back his subjects amidst rumors that a new religious leader might try to usurp his power. Some French analysts noted with concern that this kind of popular messianism had the potential to produce “another Gandhi”¹²⁾ (since M. K. Gandhi at that time had captured the leadership of the Congress Party by allying Hindus with Muslims on a platform fusing religious and nationalist ideals). Others linked Caodaism to the religious and political agitators responsible for armed insurrection, calling it “communism masquerading as a religion” (Thompson 1937, 474).

The brief, inspirational unification of a number of disparate groups began to fragment by the early 1930s, when Lê Văn Trung assumed the papacy and claimed a million disciples. Several charismatic leaders from the Mekong Delta, almost all of whom had been involved in the clandestine Minh Sư secret societies, eventually returned to their home

12) This concern is expressed in *Rapports mensuels du résident de Tây Ninh, 1929–33*, Box 65553, 7F68, Centre D’Archives d’Outre Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France.

territory rather than accepting to remain as Cardinals at the “Vatican” in Tây Ninh. The first of these was Nguyễn Văn Ca, who became the Pope of the dissident branch of Minh Chơn Lý in Mỹ Tho. The most serious rift involved the defection of Nguyễn Ngọc Tương, the District Chief (*đốc phủ sứ*) of Cần Giuộc, and Lê Bá Trang, a Chợ Lớn official, since Nguyễn Ngọc Tương had been suggested as a possible successor to Lê Văn Trung. Phạm Công Tắc accused them of being a “Francophiles” and failing to stand up to colonial restrictions on the expansion of Caodaism, and Lê Bá Trang filed a complaint against Lê Văn Trung at the French tribunal. Lê Văn Trung agreed to step down momentarily, citing his failing health, and designated four others—Phạm Công Tắc, Nguyễn Ngọc Tương, Lê Bá Trang and the female cardinal Lâm Thị Thanh as his replacements. Sanctions imposed by the French government increased, and in 1934 the “Interim Pope” himself was imprisoned by the French on charges of fiscal irregularities, and protested by furiously returning his Legion d’Honneur medal. Shortly after he was released, Lê Văn Trung fell ill and died, on the very day that Nguyễn Ngọc Tương and Lê Bá Trang had convened a conference to “reform the religion.” When Nguyễn Ngọc Tương and Lê Bá Trang tried to return to attend the funeral, they were not allowed to enter the Holy See, and were left standing in the rain with the message that Lê Văn Trung did not want them to see his face.

Lê Văn Trung had declared before he died that Phạm Công Tắc was the only one he designated to assume his authority as the leader of the faith, even if Phạm Công Tắc, as the divinely appointed Hộ Pháp, could not actually assume the position of Pope. Tương and Trang eventually formed the second largest branch of Caodaism, “the Reformed Religion” (Ban Chính Đạo), and in 1935 a council of dignitaries remaining in Tây Ninh proclaimed Phạm Công Tắc the “Superior” of the “mother church of Caodaism,” although his religious title as the Spirit Medium heading the mystical, “legislative branch” remained unchanged.

How could a religion founded on the separation of the “executive” branch (*Cửu Trùng Đài*) and the “legislative” branch (*Hiệp Thiên Đài*) be administered by a single person? The answer is presented by Phạm Công Tắc in a cleverly constructed commentary to the Religious Constitution, in which exegesis of the symbolism of the Hộ Pháp’s costume is used to “demonstrate” that this fusion of different branches was pre-ordained by the divine decrees issued in 1926. At the largest religious ceremonies, the Hộ Pháp wears elaborate golden armor with a trident “Three Mountain” (*Tam Sơn*) headdress as he sits on his throne in front of the *khí* (breath, energy) character. His left hand grasps the “Rule over Evil” staff, intended to exorcise demons, while the right cradles the beads of compassion. The explanation for this reads: “This means that the Hộ Pháp holds the power over both spiritual and temporal affairs” (Tòa Thánh Tây Ninh 1972c, *Pháp Chánh Truyền*,

Bùi trans. 2002, 190–191). Using the rhetorical strategy of explaining the arcane symbolism of his dress, Phạm Công Tắc argues against his critics within Caodaism who protested that he has “monopolized” the powers that should have been divided. His sacramental dress establishes his spiritual mandate, and presents a visual confirmation of his powers to all who might challenge him.¹³⁾

Visual statements are often more subtle and nuanced than verbal ones. In later years, the Hộ Pháp chose to make most of his public appearances in simpler yellow silk robes, without the elaborate coverings or general’s insignia that he wore so often in the early years of the religion. The “spiritual warrior” who wielded a sword as well as a pen at the age of 32 came to present himself as a “poor monk” (*Bần Đạo*) in his 50s and 60s, becoming more humble and self-ironic as he ascended to a position of greater temporal power. The martial dress of his early years, redolent of stereotypes of Oriental despots, feudal lords and medieval fiefdoms, was, however, to continue to haunt his public image, and to make it all the more difficult for him to convince a European (and later American) public that he was really a prophet of peace and non-violence.

No other Caodaist leader, not even the most respected spirit mediums of other branches, has ever worn a costume close to that of Phạm Công Tắc. The second most famous Caodai medium of the 1920s and 1930s, Liên Hoa, who received the messages contained in the “Great Cycle of Esoterism” (*Đại Thừa Chọn Giáo*) followed a more conventional Sino-Vietnamese model. Liên Hoa’s own voice is never heard in the messages themselves. He “ventriloquizes” the words of great religious teachers, including figures like Buddha, Lao Tzu and Confucius who do not speak directly in the Tây Ninh séances organized by Phạm Công Tắc. Liên Hoa himself dressed either in the severe black robes of the Minh Lý Đạo, a small temple in Saigon where he often retreated to meditate, or in the pure white used by mediums in the central Vietnamese group (Truyền Giáo Trung Việt). The texts in this esoteric “Bible” are a series of moral instructions, in the Chinese tradition of ethical teachings (Clart 2003; Jordan and Overmyer 1986; Kelley 2007), which are sprinkled with Taoist aphorisms “The Cao Đài which is not Cao Đài is

13) On May 30, 1948, during the period that the Hộ Pháp was delivering his sermons in Tây Ninh, a séance was held in which the Invisible Pope Lý Đại Tiên clarified his position further by designating him as “Hộ Pháp Chương Quân Nhị Hữu Hình Đài”—“the Defender of the Faith who has supreme powers over both visible palaces,” meaning the Hiệp Thiên Đài (Palace to Unite with Heaven, or Legislative/Spirit Medium Section) and the Cửu Trung Đài (Palace of the Nine Spheres or the Executive Section). This message also contains the line “Nhị kiếp Tây Âu cảm máy tạo,” which can be translated “In a previous life, he spread this message in the west.” Some interpret this as evidence that Phạm Công Tắc was a reincarnation of Jesus Christ, but it is in fact rather vague about which “Western” person Phạm Công Tắc has reincarnated (recorded in the unofficial selection of spirit messages (*Thánh Ngôn Sư Tập*, 3/4, 72, published by the Great Temple at Tây Ninh (Tòa Thánh Tây Ninh 1972d)).

the real Cao Đài,” like Lao Tzu’s “The Way which is not the way is the real way,” and doomsday prophecies.

For several years, Caodaism as a religion of unity was in a state of crisis. In 1930, the Tây Ninh Holy See issued a series of decrees to establish doctrinal conformity. Séances could not be held outside of the sanctified space of the Cung Đạo at the Holy See, and dignitaries and adepts had no right to challenge canonical scriptures. Some time later, in response to defections and new branches, Phạm Công Tắc issued the “Eighth Decree,” which excommunicated schismatic groups and treated them as apostates. Co-signed in a séance by the “Invisible Pope” Lý Đại Tiên, this document has proved to be the greatest obstacle to many decades of efforts to re-unify the various branches of Caodaism. Members of many smaller groups have pledged to try to achieve a new unity, but they have failed to draw Tây Ninh leaders to their meetings in any official capacity, Phạm Công Tắc’s position, which cast a great shadow over his successors, has been that the “mother church awaits the return of her errant children,” but the “children” cannot start re-uniting themselves.

Phạm Công Tắc’s sermons speak of three times in his life when he was in deep despair: when close family members died during his youth, when he was arrested and exiled by the French (1940–46), and “when the Đạo was in a state of emergency and about to fall” (Sermon #18, Jan 6, 1949, 58). His focus is on how he “offered his life for this religion” and received “solace” in return, but it is no doubt significant that he refers only to internal strife and exile as causes for great distress, and so moves the emphasis away from his extensive role in national politics.

Phạm Công Tắc proved to be a very capable and careful administrator, who rebuilt the religious hierarchy in Tây Ninh (drawing on some of his own loyal mediums in the Phạm Môn) at the same time that he constructed the largest and most impressive indigenous religious structure in Vietnam. Although French critics described him as very emotional (“He gets impassioned easily, his words, his bearing give the appearance of someone in a trance”), he saw himself as a modernizer and a reformer, who sought first to heal the wounds of colonialism through persuasion and compromise. While he was described in 1931 as a figure from the past (“In his daily contact with his co-religionists, he looks like the old sorcerer/magician of the secret societies of long ago and his hold on them has taken on the allure of former times,” Lalaurette and Vilmont 1931), by 1935 the new Governor of Cochinchina Pagès conceded that Caodaism was not a relic of another era, but “the transposition onto a modern world of ancient belief systems” (Blagov 2001, 32). For a few years, first under the new Governor-General Robin and then under the leftist Front Populaire government, Caodaism was allowed to flourish.

Dialogues with European Spirits: Victor Hugo and Spiritual Kinship

Caodaism's reputation for syncretism and borrowings from European tradition is almost entirely a result of the legacy of Phạm Công Tắc, as none of the other branches aspired to the same "international" profile or received as much moral and religious instruction from non-Asian figures. Clifford Geertz described it as a "*syncretisme à l'outrance*," whose excessive, almost transgressive mixing of East and West in dramatic configurations attracted much attention and ridicule from foreign observers (personal communication). Victor Hugo and Jeanne d'Arc, the most famous "European saints" in Caodaism, were both spirits who initially conversed only with Phạm Công Tắc, refusing to "come down" to a séance if he were not there as a medium to "receive" them.¹⁴⁾

Victor Hugo was by far the most widely read writer in colonial Indochina, popular among the Vietnamese as well as the French, and strongly identified as a defender of the oppressed and a critic of surveillance and imprisonment. Hugo's mystical poems and his practice of spiritism inspired a sense of recognition among his young readers in Saigon, who saw him as revealing the intersection of eastern and western traditions. Hugo had "oceanic" visions of Asian wisdom spreading to Europe, and toyed with vegetarianism and ideas of reincarnation in his verses, without ever forming a coherent or systematic belief based on these connections.

The inclusion of Western historical and literary figures in the Caodai pantheon is far from a glorification of Occidental culture. On the contrary, it honors a few brave souls while sounding the death knells for western imperial rule. So Victor Hugo, the great enemy of Napoleon the Third during his lifetime, speaks in séances to condemn the conquest of Indochina and the "tyranny of potentates." Jeanne d'Arc, a village girl who heard voices that told her to rise up against an occupying army, says that "an oppressed people once raised to consciousness will prove impossible to defeat." Shakespeare, although praised for having inspired an empire "without borders or truces" (*sans arrêt et sans trêve*), is also informed that the glory days of British Asia are over, and after a great war the godless colonial administration will "march into an abyss" (*marche vers le gouffre*) and perish as well (Trần Quang Vinh 1962, 58, 90, 108).

Victor Hugo is controversial in Caodaism today not because of his writings, which

14) When Phạm Công Tắc was imprisoned in Madagascar, Trần Quang Vinh received a short message from Victor Hugo at an unofficial séance in Căn Cứ on October 19, 1944, telling him to be careful but persist in his efforts (Trần Quang Vinh 1972, 164). After the Hộ Pháp returned, the divine sanction for the creation of the Caodai Army was confirmed in an official séance in the Cung Đạo Tòa Thánh on April 9, 1948 by messages from the Invisible Pope Lý Thái Bạch and Lê Văn Trung, with the Hộ Pháp as chief medium (*ibid.*, 187–189).

are still widely admired by an older generation of Vietnamese intellectuals, but because of the messages attributed to him in which he supports Phạm Công Tắc's struggles with his critics: "You are blessed, in your capacity as medium. . . . Even if terrestrial spirits are unfaithful to you, the gates of Paradise will applaud your actions" (*ibid.*, 85–86). Phạm Công Tắc's assumption of the leadership of Tây Ninh is also defended by the spirit of La Fontaine, the French fabulist whose story of the hardworking black ant is used to criticize the "lazy yellow ants" who want to assume hierarchical positions based on the seniority and rank they had in the French colonial administration. The "younger brothers" of the College of Spirit Mediums (Hiệp Thiên Đài) are said to prevail "from hard work and intelligence," while their elders are swollen "with pride that will soon prove fatal" (*ibid.*, 75).

In Chinese traditions, mediums are often "adopted" by the spirits they converse with, who make them part of an invisible family.¹⁵ But while Victor Hugo spoke to Phạm Công Tắc in the affectionate tones of an avuncular schoolmaster, two other adepts in Phnom Penh were designated in séances as his spiritual sons: Đặng Trung Chử as his older son Charles and Trần Quang Vinh as his younger son François. This spiritual kinship was announced in December 1931, when Trần Quang Vinh returned from spending several months in France, helping to mount the Exposition Coloniale Internationale in Paris for his employer, the Musée Sarrault of Indochinese Art. It was revealed that Hugo, as the Spiritual Head of the Caodai Overseas Mission, had sent Trần Quang Vinh on a religious mission to seek political support for the new religion, and form a circle of 15 French Caodaists practicing in the metropole. Both of Hugo's spiritual sons eventually rose to become archbishops (Phối Sư) in the administrative hierarchy.

It is interesting to explore the ramifications of these different forms of defining spiritual kinship within Caodaism. In his sermons, Phạm Công Tắc notes the Taoist and Buddhist traditions identify spiritual teachers as "schoolmasters" (*thầy*), while the Christian one instructs its adherents to address God as "father." In Sermon #17 (Dec 26, 1948), the Hộ Pháp asks his advisor Victor Hugo ("Chưởng Đạo") "So why is it that the Supreme Being called himself Master?" He is answered with a poem: "As a Father I look after my children with love and diligence, As a Master I welcome them into My Divinity" (Sermon #17, 53). The intimate, affectionate dialogues that Phạm Công Tắc (as a medium) receives and re-enacts for Trần Quang Vinh and Đặng Trung Chử are not

15) In Chinese spirit medium practices, the medium is called the *tang-ki* (equivalent to the Vietnamese *dòng tử*), literally meaning "young medium," but his intimate connection to the god which possesses him is expressed by calling him the "ritually adopted child of the deity" (Seaman 1980, 67). His birth parents give up their child to the service of the gods, and the medium must learn to behave as "someone who has the high reputation of his divine father to consider" (*ibid.*, 68).

extended to himself. Hugo's spiritual sons are considered to be reincarnations of his French sons, and like Hugo's French sons they grew up to be writers and revolutionaries, people who penned poetry and manned the ramparts of anti-imperial resistance. Like Hugo's French son François, who transcribed his father's séances and later translated Shakespeare, Hugo's Vietnamese son Trần Quang Vinh transcribed spirit séances, edited Hugo's posthumous verses in a collection published in 1960, translated them into Vietnamese from the original French, and celebrated the 167th anniversary of Hugo's birth May 22, 1937 with the consecration of a temple in Phnom Penh containing a portrait of his spiritual father.¹⁶⁾ In his autobiography, Trần Quang Vinh notes that he received the news of this designation as marking him out for a special spiritual destiny that he could not refuse (Trần Quang Vinh 1972). Following a worldly path, Trần Quang Vinh later became the founder of the Caodai Army in 1945 and Defense Minister of South Vietnam in 1950.

The Hộ Pháp, in contrast, saw his own destiny as leading in a more ethereal direction, one more on the same plane as the divinities. His vow of celibacy is not explicitly discussed in his sermons, but its necessity for purifying the body and preparing it to receive spirit messages is acknowledged, and he had no more children after he received this divine appointment. A human being, the Hộ Pháp notes in his sermons, is "an angel riding upon an animal" (Sermon #21, Feb 9, 1949, 65). Spiritual aspirations towards self cultivation and self-illuminated reflect "the desire to leave our animal self in order to transform into a Buddha" (Sermon #21, 67), so that "the method of our spirit is to struggle to defeat the material" (Sermon #22, Feb 15, 1949, 69), since "true happiness is not corporeal, it is spiritual" (Sermon #22, 69), not transitory (or physical) but enduring.

In a sermon delivered in 1949 on the anniversary of Hugo's death, Phạm Công Tắc revealed that Victor Hugo himself emerged from the spiritual lineage of Nguyễn Du. In this way, Hugo is "indigenized" and tied to a Vietnamese literary giant, while Du becomes more "cosmopolitan" and finds his own genius plotted on a map with French coordinates. This twist came at a political moment when efforts to renew the social contract and heal

16) Victor Hugo's sons by birth both died well before he did. Charles (reincarnated as Đặng Trung Chử, made archbishop in 1946), who served as the chief medium at the séances in Jersey, died at the age of 44 of a heart attack followed by a massive hemorrhage caused by obesity, over-indulgence and long winter nights spent manning the guns on the ramparts of Paris during political uprisings (Robb 1997, 462). He and his brother François had been imprisoned in the Conciergerie in 1851, when the prison had become "an informal socialist university" where Victor Hugo prophesied a revolution which would lead to the "United States of Europe" (*ibid.*, 290). François, the younger son (reincarnated as Trần Quang Vinh), translated Shakespeare into French and defended the 1848 uprising, finally dying of tuberculosis two years later (*ibid.*, 490). While both had relatively short lives, they were filled with political turmoil, literary aspirations and spiritual longings.

the wounds of colonialism ceded to a post-World War II realization of the inevitability of decolonization. It also marked a change in the perspective of Phạm Công Tắc himself, who once sat as a student reading the works of the French humanists, but later saw their insights as dwarfed by a more encompassing Asian religious vision. Absorbing Hugo into a new position as the “younger brother” or more recent incarnation of Nguyễn Du can only be read as an attempt to disprove the civilizing role attributed to colonialism.

Using Orientalism against Empire: Theology as Political and Cultural Critique

When the American scholar Virginia Thompson visited French Indochina in the 1930s, she found Caodaism to be “the one constructive indigenous movement among the Annamites” (1937, 475) and was particularly full of praise for what the Hộ Pháp had done with Tây Ninh, building schools, printing presses and weaver’s looms with a “Gandhiesque flavor about creating a community which is self-sufficient” (*ibid.*, 474). Both Gandhi and Phạm Công Tắc foregrounded cultural nationalism as a major strategy of anti-colonial resistance. The notion of a return to pure, indigenous traditions with emphasis on certain forms of moral and ethical strength, was important in preparing people to resist an apparently overwhelming colonial power. Influenced by Social Darwinism, Gandhi argued that Indians had brought on the degeneracy of India by their own moral faults and complicity by following foreign consumer fashions. Phạm Công Tắc drew on an earlier tradition of prophecies that the Vietnamese brought colonialism on themselves as a punishment for their sins, but had now paid their karmic debts and would be rewarded for their suffering under the colonial yoke by becoming the “spiritual masters of mankind.”

Paul Mus, in trying to explain why the “mysticism” of the Caodaists tended to detach itself from the colonial project, argued that the French misunderstood the religious content of Vietnamese supernaturalism: “We mistook divinatory magic for instrumental magic” (1952, 292). Diviners in the East Asian tradition seek to discern cosmic patterns rather than to change them through some sort of supernatural agency. So the philosophical and religious ideas of the great teachers were used to *diagnose* the Western malaise rather than to act directly against it. Mus explains: “Human ideas, and the means and efforts that they are part of, are nothing if they do not translate an idea of cosmic harmony, celestial order which is strong enough to make them successful. Assistance must fall from the sky and come out of the land. To build a religious restoration of a mystical Vietnam, rooted in the popular beliefs of the masses still steeped in the past, it is necessary first to prove that this is efficacious” (*ibid.*, 292–293). He was critical of

French efforts to “prove” their superior power with technology, which were, as his students like Francis Fitzgerald have later added, even more accentuated by American military forces (Fitzgerald 1972).

In arguing that Vietnamese “patriotism, like their religion, is divinatory” (Mus 1952, 293) Mus argued that it was linked to efforts to discern the wider elements at work in the universe. Defending the land of their ancestors from foreign intrusions came to appear as a spiritual mission. Since ancestor worship is “the only religion without skeptics,” Mus argues that airplanes are powerless against guerilla warriors defending their native soil, who believe that their own ancestors empower them by remaining within the bodies of their descendants and being visualized at each incense offering in front of the family altar.

But he failed to take into account the innovations in Vietnamese patriotism introduced by Phạm Công Tắc’s exoteric Caodaism. The Hộ Pháp established a more instrumental form of séance, which sought not only to understand the world but (in Marx’s words) also to change it. At the same time that these religious teachings were rooted in tradition and presented themselves as revivals, they introduced a different system of weighting cultural strains and placed many practices of the cultural periphery back in the center. The central doctrine of Caodaism was the millenarian claim that the end of the Age of Empire was also the end of a cosmic cycle, and it would be the formerly colonized peoples (and especially the Vietnamese) who would emerge as the new spiritual leaders of the world. Drawing on the “recessive elements of Christianity” which were also important in Gandhi’s message (Nandy 2005, 74), they argued that the meek would not only inherit the earth but they could use a sense of the moral supremacy of the oppressed as one of their most important weapons.

Far from being a “cargo cult” which worshipped the sources of foreign power and wealth and praised them, Caodaist doctrines preached that resistance to colonial ideology and material practices would allow the Vietnamese to detach themselves and experience a rebirth in which they could reincarnate East Asian cultural values restored to their pristine state. Gandhi had been quick to see that Theosophy, and an idealized notion of the spiritual values of the East, could have great political potential, and he used that potential both by allying himself with Annie Besant’s Home Rule for India League and by focusing not so much on colonialism itself as on the moral and cultural superiority of Indian civilization. Phạm Công Tắc also appropriated what we could anachronistically call “counter culture discourses” from “Annamophiles” in French spiritist and Theosophy circles, and mounted a concerted long distance public relations campaign to force the French to permit the expansion of Caodaism.

Phạm Công Tắc used his facility in French and his wish to draw on the colonial

arsenal to chart a pathway in which a westernized young man full of anti-colonial sentiment is gradually instructed by the spirits in Asian verities, and moves from being the “hand” or the “pen” of the gods to becoming their conversation partner and even—in his later visions—an active combatant, driving out demonic forces.¹⁷ The older, more mature Phạm Công Tắc no longer gets lessons from the French literary figures he studied in colonial schools. He no longer seeks to reform to colonialism by reconciling the ideals of the French enlightenment with the actions of narrow-minded administrators. Instead, he inserts himself into his own journey to the east, moving away from a nativist search for heritage to a more cosmopolitan vision of a syncretic, unifying faith.

Paul Mus described Caodaism as a “religion of reversal” (*religion de remplacement*) in which the colonial subjects would come to replace their masters: “In trying to revive

17) Phạm Công Tắc’s sermons culminate with a narrative of his voyages to the upperworld, traveling in a plane-like “dharma vehicle” which moves from cloud to cloud, where he encounters Lucifer (Kim Quang Sú), described as a “great Immortal” who is “almost at the level of a Buddha” but was frustrated because his immense ambitions and striving for personal power undermined his sanctity. Phạm Công Tắc’s exegesis directs us to read this passage as a comment on his own struggles to maintain control of Caodaism. At the time of the inauguration of the Great Way of the Third Age of Redemption, Lucifer was also granted an “amnesty” (the possibility of redemption) and the gates of hell were formally closed. So Lucifer was present when the first temple was erected at Gò Kén, and “he attended the first séances, held the beaked phoenix basket and signed his name” (Sermon #33, Apr 19, 1949, 115), but he has always been a force of divisiveness, leaving behind a poem at the time when “we had no bad intentions against each other; there was not even a whisper of rebellion” (Sermon #33, 114), and suggesting an ultimatum:

All nine immortals fear my face
 I may bow to Sakyamuni, but chaos thunders in my wake
 You see how I’m received at that Palace of Jade
 But will truth or heresy usher you into the Pure Land? (Sermon #33, 114)

The Supreme God allowed Lucifer to “carry out over 20 years, trick after scheming trick” (Sermon #33, 115) because human beings had to exercise their free will, they had to choose the Tao over alternatives. Lucifer’s temptations provided the field upon which virtuous conduct would be a conscious choice rather than a simple reflex. At the gates to Paradise, Lê Văn Trung fights Lucifer off with a stick, but each time he strikes, the blow only divides his enemy into two. Aided by another Caodai dignitary, he leads a great battle, which the Hộ Pháp himself is finally forced to join. He puts on his golden armor, takes up his golden whip and his exorcist’s staff, and casts his whip like a giant net to isolate his enemy and finally drive him off, vaporizing him into an aura (Sermon #33, 117).

Inscribing himself as the hero in a *Journey to the West*-like epic, Phạm Công Tắc in this passage moves out of his habitual role as Tripitaka (Tam Tạng, “This is why I pray to the Supreme Being as Tripitaka did on his journeys to India seeking Buddhist scriptures” Sermon #28, Mar 21, 1949, 92), the bearer of scripture for a new faith, and acts much more like the Monkey Saint (Tê Thiên Đại Thánh), jumping into the fray. Intriguingly, several recent scholars (Seaman 1986, 488; Yu 1983) have speculated that popular Chinese religious accounts of supernatural voyages (*Tây Du Ký*, *Bắc Du Ký*) may themselves have developed out of spirit writing séances, in which the medium was—as we see in this passage—“playing all the parts” or at least narrating them for his audience.

a Vietnamese empire, these theocratic sects do not only go beyond our ideas, they annihilate them” (Mus 1952, 248). He argued, on that basis, that their vision of change was in many ways more radical than that of the communists, who “remain within the lines of our own worldview”: “The more ‘conservative’ anti-colonial forces, and especially those with a mystical bent, may fight with us against communism, but they see our own cultural influence as similar to that of the communists, who are the ungrateful heirs of western materialism” (*ibid.*, 249).

While Phạm Công Tắc (like Gandhi) was usually seen as preaching a “counter-modernity,” and spoke of restoring traditional values, it is also true that “his counter-modernity proved to be the most modern of all those of anti-colonial activists” (Young 2001, 334). In the final decade of his life, the Hộ Pháp began to operate in a media war, using the society of spectacle as his secret weapon. He gave a series of press conferences, met with foreign reporters, traveled to Geneva and to Japan, Taiwan and Hanoi as a “spirit medium diplomat,” desperately opposing partition.

Bernard Fall visited Phạm Công Tắc in August 1953 to ask for his perspective on the decolonization process. The Caodist leader impressed him deeply, as noted in a letter to his wife not published until recently: “The man had a piercing intelligence and his approach to things is very realistic. I learned more about Indochina than I’d learned before in three and half months. To think that he was sitting there with me telling me about the need for French help after he’d spent five years in French banishment in Madagascar. The man was fascinating and I can see why two million people think he’s the next thing to God himself—and that includes a lot of educated Europeans” (Dorothy Fall 2004, 77–78). Fall famously described Phạm Công Tắc as “the shrewdest Vietnamese politician,” but remained skeptical about whether he could use his religious base to reconcile the increasingly polarized forces of what became the DRV and RVN (Bernard Fall 1955, 249, republished in 1966, 148).

In 1953–54, Phạm Công Tắc gave a series of press conferences praising both Bảo Đại and Hồ Chí Minh and calling for national union. When the French were defeated at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954, he called for a reconciliation of the southern nationalists with the northern communists. Phạm Công Tắc believed that his religion of unity would provide the ideal setting for negotiations to bring Vietnam’s different political groups together, and he hoped for French and American backing for this to proceed. He attended the Geneva Conventions and tried to work behind the scenes to convince others, but this proposal was doomed to defeat when the French and Việt Minh agreed to the “temporary measure” of a partition at the 17th parallel.

Phạm Công Tắc and many other Caodaists had been willing to work with Bảo Đại, but as Ngô Đình Diệm moved to consolidate his own power with US backing, the non-

aligned nationalists were forcibly dissolved. In October 1955, Ngô Đình Diệm ordered Caodai General Phuong to invade the Holy See and strip Phạm Công Tắc of all his temporal powers. Three hundred of his papal guardsmen were disarmed and Phạm Công Tắc became a virtual prisoner of his own troops. On February 19, 1956, Phạm Công Tắc's daughters and a number of other religious leaders were arrested, but he himself managed to slip away. He made contact with his followers several weeks later from Phnom Penh, and lived out the last three years of his life in exile in Cambodia.

The non-violence that Phạm Công Tắc consistently preached in his final years and his much-touted concept of “peaceful coexistence” (*hòa bình chung sống*) never had, of course, the purity of Gandhi's doctrine of passive resistance. Although he did not know about the formation of the Caodai Army during his over five years of exile in French colonial prisons in Madagascar and the Comores Islands, Phạm Công Tắc's acceptance of the militarization of Caodaism is, for other Caodaists as well as for many outsiders, the most controversial aspect of his career. The Hộ Pháp called the Caodai militia “the fire inside the heart which may burn and destroy it” (*tâm nuôi hỏa*) (Bùi and Beck 2000, 85) and immediately moved its military headquarters out of the Holy See, but he did see the political expediency of having a “defense force” to protect his followers and give him leverage in a precarious balancing act, suspended between the French and the Việt Minh.

Phạm Công Tắc insisted that Caodaism needed to remain “independent” (*độc lập*), refusing to align with either side and seeking a peaceful path through the decolonization process. Caodaists had long nourished a utopian vision of living as an autonomous community, owing deference neither to the French colonial government nor to the Việt Minh. During the period 1946–54, they came close to realizing that dream, because the French agreed to create a “state within a state,” where Caodaists had their own administration, collected their own taxes, enjoyed religious freedom, and received French weapons and funding for their troops. Caodai soldiers served under their own commanders, as a peace-keeping force, but were not sent to fight the Việt Minh in the north. This created a mini-theocracy within the province of Tây Ninh, whose dramatic performance of power could be interpreted as an effort to demonstrate the nationalist dream of autonomy, even as it was made possible by the embattled French colonial administration.

A number of other Caodaists, associated with branches like Minh Chơn Lý, Minh Chơn Đạo, Ban Chính Đạo, and Tiên Thiên, joined the Việt Minh against the French. The “Franco-Caodai Pact” negotiated with the Tây Ninh Church did not provide for the release of other Caodai leaders from prison or exile, and for this reason it served to divide rather than unite the religion. Phạm Công Tắc's efforts to play the peacemaker were ultimately unsuccessful, and his praise for the principle of “peaceful co-existence” put him out of

favor with more strongly anti-communist leaders. Although Phạm Công Tắc described himself as following “the same path as Gandhi” (Sermon #20, Jan 16, 1949), even those sympathetic to his political goals found his choice of a martial idiom showed “more ego and a greater search for personal power” than the Indian independence leader.

Gandhi considered the partition of India on one level a personal failure, and Phạm Công Tắc’s final writings sound a similar note, suggesting that Caodaists, and all Vietnamese, should seek expiation for their divisiveness.¹⁸⁾ His deathbed request to King Sihanouk was that he would not be returned to Vietnam until the country was “unified, or pursuing the policy of peace and neutrality to which I gave my life.” But even as he saw many his hopes crushed, the Hộ Pháp still knew how to use man’s sense of guilt creatively: He promised his followers a moral victory by drawing on the non-martial self of the apparent victors to create doubts about their victory in them. On an ethical plane, his final words echoed Romain Rolland’s formula “Victory is always more catastrophic for the vanquishers than for the vanquished” (Nandy 2005). The suffering of the defeated can enhance their moral character and make them strong, while the triumphant celebrations of their opponents open the way for corruption and decadence.

Conclusions: A Legacy Combining Stagecraft and Statecraft

The lively debates that I witnessed about the repatriation of the Hộ Pháp’s remains in November 2006 reflect several dimensions of the mimesis among religions in the colonial and post-colonial context and the propensities of southern Vietnamese religions to both imitate and assimilate symbolically various sources of power. The precocious embrace of modernity that we see in Caodaism went further than normative colonial or even communist ideologies at the time, and was part of a “spiritual re-structuring” of the nation also evident in other Vietnamese religions (Taylor 2007). Understanding Phạm Công Tắc as a performer, drawing on various “repertoires” and fusing them into an efficacious enactment of a discourse of power, allows our analysis to come closer to that of contemporary scholars of East Asian religion, who have argued that Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism are—as Caodai scriptures teach—closer to “repertoires” than to “religions,”

18) In the spirit message from Lý Đại Tiên received by the Hộ Pháp on April 9, 1948, Phạm Công Tắc is asked “not to feel hurt that the army was established in his absence,” but instead to accept it as part of a divine mechanism. He is however cautioned that his main trials lie ahead, since “this divisiveness does not help to save the world” (*mà lại đồ kỹ chẳng dám cứu đời*), and if the Vietnamese people do not respond to the call to religion, they cannot be saved (Trần Quang Vinh 1972, 188–189).

since their doctrines are not mutually exclusive and they are more properly understood as cultural resources from which individuals have marshaled different ideas and practices at different times (Campany 2003; 2006).

Since Caodaists formed pacts with a series of allies who failed to lead them to victory, it can be argued that Caodai leaders like Phạm Công Tắc may have perfected, perhaps a bit opportunistically, a “theology of the vanquished,” which privileges the moral authority of the oppressed and constantly defers the moment when the prophesied triumph will come. While that may be true, it is also a theology that has periodically—like the magical phoenix bird that is its central occult icon—managed to regenerate itself and regain its moral forcefulness at critical junctures. For many Tây Ninh Caodaists, the return of the Hộ Pháp’s body in November 2006 was one of those junctures, and whether this means that the Hộ Pháp’s spirit will be “pushing the wheel of karma in a new direction” (as one of his followers recently told me) remains to be seen.

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