

The Charitable Works of Vietnamese Caodaism

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ABSTRACT: The article explores the Works of Charity (Phước Thiện), a branch of Cao Đài's structural organization, as a central feature of that religion's activities. It traces their origins to the 1920s and 1930s, and follows their development and resilience through different Vietnamese political situations. The Works of Charity in Caodaism established solid foundations for the religion to grow, and became an effective economic tool to assist the Vietnamese in overcoming sufferings in times of both war and peace.

KEYWORDS: Caodaism, Cao Đài, Cao Đài Works of Charity, Holy See of Tây Ninh, New Religions in Vietnam.

Introduction

Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ (大道三期普度), commonly known as Caodaism, is a syncretistic religion officially born in Vietnam in 1926. Caodaism aims to combine the Three Great Teachings of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, and to unify the Five Branches of the Great Way: Way of Humanity, Way of the Genii, Way of Saints, Way of Immortals, and Way of Buddhas. Caodaism's motto is to bring about "Justice and Universal Love" to all human beings and living beings with three objectives: Life Protection, Benevolence, and Universality (Bảo Sanh, Nhơn Nghĩa, and Đại Đồng). Caodaism was one of the very few Vietnamese homegrown religions to be involved in the politics of Nationalist Movements. The religion persisted during the period of French Colonization, surprisingly survived throughout the Vietnam Wars, and quietly developed to

become Vietnam's third largest religious organization after Buddhism and Christianity, despite suffocating suppression by ruling governments.

Although there is still debate over why and in what ways this religious organization was politically engaged, and over how it could survive and firmly develop through such a critical context in Vietnam, Caodaism remained a shelter for its followers in terms of spirituality and personal security. The Cao Đài Religion emerged in Southern Vietnam in 1926 and was widely accepted by large groups of people within a short period of time, gaining more than 20,000 new followers within two months of the religion's official inauguration (Gobron 1950, 28), and around 500,000 "fellows" by 1930 (Blagov 2016, 27). This religious organization became a spiritual phenomenon not only because of its new system of philosophy and doctrine but also because of its active political involvement during the first half of the 20th century.

There have been several studies on how Caodaism quickly became an essential part of the Vietnamese's daily spiritual life, how this religious organization could gain the trust of the masses within a short time, and how this religion developed at different stages. Nevertheless, researchers seem to have paid an overwhelming attention to Caodaism's representative figures, history, structural organization, philosophy, doctrine, and even political involvement, while to date little research has been done on an important institution of Caodaism called Works of Charity (Phước Thiện) and on its commitments to social development.

The purpose of this article is to study how the Caodaists implemented their "Universal Love and Justice" motto in practice, and how they tried to achieve their three aims "Life Protection, Benevolence, and Universality" through their charitable system. My research will also show that the well-organized charitable activities by the Caodaists were an effective way to finance the religious organization's growth. In addition, Cao Đài humanitarian activities through the Institution of Works of Charity were central to help relieving human sufferings in social crises, making Caodaism a reliable institution where Vietnamese learned to take refuge.

History of Cao Đài Charity Works (Phước Thiện)

Soon after the official inauguration ceremony of Caodaism in Tây Ninh in 1926, under the instructions they believed they had received by the divinities

through spirit writing, the Caodaists went to different provinces and localities to construct Cao Đài Temples and propagandize Caodaism to the populace. In 1927, they reported that, through spirit messages, the Holy Mother Goddess instructed the Hộ Pháp (the Dharma Protector and Head Medium Phạm Công Tắc, 1890–1959) to go to Phú Mỹ Village in the Châu Thành District of Mỹ Tho Province in the Mekong Delta to construct a Cao Đài Temple named Khố Hiền Trang.

Also in 1927, Caodaists believe that the Spiritual Pope Li Tai Bai (李白, 701–762, a Chinese poet during the Tang Dynasty in ancient China) instructed from the spiritual world a medium named Đinh Công Trứ (1903–1949) in this village to establish the “Conscience Benevolence Group” (Minh Thiện Đàn), to gather disciples and teach them spiritual self-cultivation and mediumship. Then, in 1929, devotees believe that Guan Gong (Đức Quan Công or 關羽, 162–220, a Chinese military general in the last Han Dynasty in ancient China) instructed another medium called Lê Văn Trung (1876–1934) also in this Phú Mỹ Village to establish a “Common Gratitude Group” (Đồng Nghĩa Đường) to recruit members for the Conscience Benevolence Group (Hông 1997, 13).

In 1929, it was reported that the Spiritual Pope Li Tai Bai, in a Spiritualist séance, taught that “Conscience Benevolence Group” (Minh Thiện Đàn) means “Returning to the good” (Quy Thiện), which also means “Buddha Gate” (Phạm Môn) and instructed the Hộ Pháp, as Supreme Leader of Caodaism, to take charge of this group.

The Hộ Pháp chose 72 pioneers out of approximately 700 members of this Conscience Benevolence Group, and sent them to Tây Ninh Province to work as volunteers at a farm called Phạm Nghiệp. In the meantime, the other members of the Conscience Benevolence Group were advised to cooperate with the Khố Hiền Trang Cao Đài Temple in the same village to do charitable works and to help one another and the villagers in their daily lives, and wait for the chance to be chosen to join the other 72 pioneers in Tây Ninh Province. Some of these Conscience Benevolence Group members were also sent to other localities to help develop charitable activities along the same model there. Soon, the number of the “Conscience Benevolence Group” followers who were later converted to Cao Đài grew to more than 17,000 (Hông 1997, 16).

The 72 pioneers who went to Tây Ninh to work as volunteers were organized in a group called Phạm Môn, under the direct instruction and management of the Hộ Pháp. The Phạm Môn members called the Hộ Pháp “Master,” because he trained them in additional ways of esoteric self-cultivation in Caodaism. The members of Phạm Môn were organized into small communities in which they worked and did business together, trying to make a living independently for themselves and donating the profits to the Cao Đài religion, both for religious activities and infrastructure construction and to support the underprivileged.

The initial small farm called Phạm Nghiệp in the Trường Hòa village eventually became a well-developed agricultural production area and a multi-business manufacturing enterprise, which recruited many more volunteers and supplied abundant funding for the religious activities and construction of Cao Đài religious facilities.

The rapid development of the Cao Đài religious organization and the Phạm Nghiệp enterprise made the French in Indochina suspicious of the Caodaists. Subsequently, the French shut down all these manufacturing facilities and harassed the business activities of Phạm Nghiệp. In this critical context, the volunteers and workers scattered to all the Mekong Delta provinces to continue clearing new farmlands and operating manufacturing businesses.

In 1935, when the French finally granted full religious freedom to the Caodaists, the Hộ Pháp transformed the Phạm Môn group into the “Cơ Quan Phước Thiện” (Organ of Good Works, or Charitable Body), which managed all the religion’s agricultural lands, manufacturing facilities, and business activities throughout the six provinces of Southern Vietnam.

In 1938, the Cơ Quan Phước Thiện became an official part of the Cao Đài Religion under the “Cao Đài Religious Law 1938” (*Đạo Luật Mậu Dần 1938* 1969) (see Figure 2). Also in this year, the Hộ Pháp—and, the Caodaists believe, the Spiritual Pope Li Tai Bai from the spiritual world—signed Decree No. 48/PT dated October 19, Year of the Tiger (solar calendar: December 10, 1938) confirming the establishment of the Charitable Body and its twelve holy ranks (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Dignitaries of the Charitable Body in the 1940s.
Courtesy of the Cao Đài Overseas Missionary.

The Structural Organization of the Cao Đài Charitable Body

In the chronological order of twelve rankings in this organization, the “Buddha-like Cultivator” (Phật Tử, equivalent to Pope) is the highest rank, followed by “Immortal-like Cultivator” (Tiên Tử, equivalent to Censor-Cardinal), and “Saint-like Cultivator” (Thánh Nhơn, equivalent to Cardinal), down to the lower rank “Wise Person” (Minh Đức, simple fellow).

As shown in Figure 2, the ranks in the Charitable Body/Council are equivalent to parallel ranks in the Executive Council (Cửu Trùng Đài), depending on the accumulation of the Caodaists’ virtues, good deeds, and contributions to religious activities and charitable works.

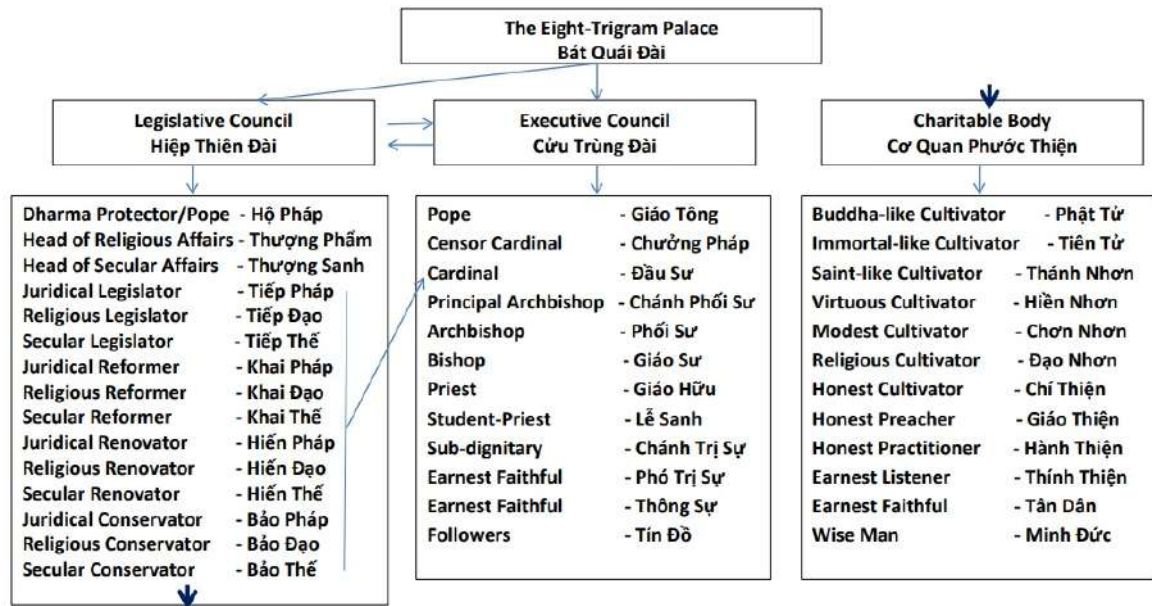


Figure 2. Cao Đài Religion’s hierarchy.

The structural organization of this Charitable Body (see Figure 3) is also similar to that of the Executive Council, which manages the administration of the entire system of the Cao Đài Religion. Accordingly, in the Charitable Body, the Chairperson is a member of the Legislative Body (Hiệp Thiên Đài). There are also two different “sides” for males and females. These two sides have separate responsibilities and powers. There are two different sub-chairpersons who have achieved at least the fifth rank of “Chơn Nhơn,” one for the male side and one for the female side. Under the sub-chairpersons, there are vice sub-chairpersons of each side managing the nine ministries (viện) including “Interiors, Rites, Security, Finances, Supply, Education, Agriculture, Public Works, and Health” (Nghia 1974, 143).

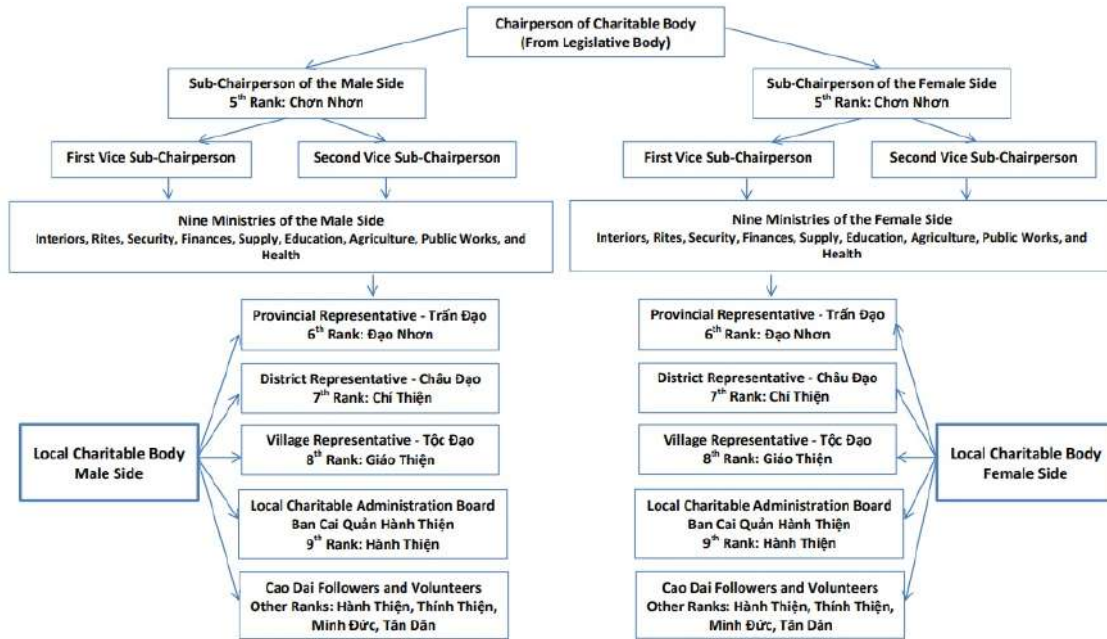


Figure 3. Structural organization of the Charitable Body, from headquarters to local units.

The two systems of the Executive Body and the Charitable Body operate parallel to each other, from the Central Headquarters in the Cao Đài Tây Ninh Holy See to local parishes. The Dignitaries from the Executive Body are responsible for religious affairs and for the construction of temples of God the Father, whereas the dignitaries from the Charitable Body are responsible for charitable works and construction of temples of the Holy Mother Goddess. To fulfill their responsibilities, the Charitable Body encourages the Caodaists and volunteers to increase agricultural production, manufacturing, and other business activities to serve charitable works and religious purposes.

Until 1971, there were a total of 6,044 dignitaries in the Charitable Body. Due to the effects of the Vietnam War and the political change in Vietnam after the national reunification, although the charitable activities continued in the local units, the administration of this Central Charitable Body in the Tây Ninh Holy See was nearly halted. This was just an interruption in the official management board of the Charitable Body, and did not affect the charitable activities in each local community of Caodaists.

The Cao Đài Central Charitable Body became active again in 2005. According to recent statistics, there are more than 2,000 dignitaries appointed by the Sacerdotal Council of Cao Đài Tây Ninh Holy See to work in charitable bodies

from the Headquarters to local units. However, the number of Caodaists and volunteers donating to charity activities is much higher.

The Charitable Body's Major Responsibilities

In the Cao Đài Religious Law 1938 the Charitable Body was described as mainly concerned with the development of the social community of Caodaists in the Tây Ninh Province and other localities where Cao Đài followers lived.

As regulated in the Cao Đài Religious Law 1938, the Charitable Body should cater to the needs of the elderly, widows, orphans, and in general all the underprivileged, whether or not they belong to Caodaism. In addition, it should care, both spiritually and materially, for the families of those dignitaries who abandoned their homes to devote themselves entirely to the religious activities of Caodaism (*Đạo Luật Mậu Dần 1938* 1969).

To fulfill its charitable responsibilities, the Charitable Body must have sufficient financial and material means. For this purpose, the Charitable Body petitioned the Cao Đài Sacerdotal Council to be authorized to manage forests and industrial works, the development of agricultural production, and manufacturing and local commercial activities (Minh 2013).

After 1938, when the Charitable Body officially became part of the Cao Đài Religion, its structural organization was well-established and developed, from the local parishes to the headquarters at the Tây Ninh Holy See. In 1970, the Cao Đài Charitable Body managed a total of 108 different business activities throughout Southern Vietnam, including ninety-nine rice paddy fields, three rubber plantations, five handcraft manufacturers, and one shopping center (Huan n.d.). Thousands of hectares of agricultural lands, and thousands of manufacturing units and businesses operated in all provinces and cities in Southern Vietnam, generating large financial resources for charitable activities as well as for the construction of all Cao Đài infrastructures and facilities.

The Charitable Body: Financial Means

Caodaism was established in Tây Ninh Province in a context where the entire economy in Indochina was under the strict control of the French colonial

government, while the great majority of Vietnamese were impoverished (Smith 2009). Therefore, during the first decade after its establishment, the Cao Đài religion had tremendous financial difficulties in constructing worship places and conducting religious activities. Some of the wealthier followers donated most of their fortunes to the construction of the Tây Ninh Great Temple and other Cao Đài temples in more distant localities. Nevertheless, these donations were unstable and limited.

After the Charitable Body was established, the Caodaists turned large forests into agricultural regions, and a variety of manufacturing enterprises emerged, bringing a huge revenue stream. Part of this income was reinvested in new crops and business activities and to cover religious and charitable activities of the local units. The rest was sent to the Tây Ninh Holy See for the construction of its headquarters and other religious facilities in the Cao Đài Holy See Complex.

In addition, Cao Đài followers started to donate foods and necessary materials for the construction of Cao Đài temples and the support of charitable activities, as a way to implement the “three achievements” self-cultivation method (Tam Lập). This method taught the Caodaists about doing the good works in Caodaism and contributing to charitable organizations (Lập Công); upholding the religion’s virtues (Lập Đức); and spreading the word of the Third Amnesty (Lập Ngôn). The Caodaists believe that the more contributions to the Cao Đài religion they make, the more merits they accumulate (Hồng 2003, 309–11).

During the 1930s, there were 105 new Cao Đài Temples built, and a total of 128 Cao Đài parishes throughout Indochina came under the control of the Tây Ninh Holy See. In all 128 parishes, the Charitable Body was well-established as a way of connecting Caodaists together, and linking them with local people of all religions through spiritual, economic, and social activities. A strong network of local Caodaist Charitable Bodies took deep roots in daily lives throughout Indochina, especially in the countryside.

Salvation through Religious and Charitable Activities

The Cao Đài Religion emerged when all of Indochina was under French colonization and administration. Under the harsh administration and exploitative policies of the French government, the gap between the rich and the poor grew increasingly large. The poor in rural regions lost their lands, and became even

more impoverished. They were trapped in an economic crisis, and almost lost hope in life because of their limited options.

The philanthropic activities and the good works of the Caodaists grew in importance among the peasants who struggled economically due to the exploitative policies of the French government in Indochina. The Caodaists improved the peasants' lives, giving them a sense of salvation through religious and charitable activities (My-Van 1996, 181; see Figure 4).



Figure 4. A poor villager's home rebuilt by the Caodaists in Tây Ninh province. Courtesy of Cao Đài Overseas Missionary.

From the 1920s through the 1970s, constant political and armed conflicts amongst different political forces including French colonizers, the Japanese army, Communist forces and other revolutionary groups, nationalist forces, and American troops, left the Vietnamese abandoned and confused. They felt their lives were constantly threatened and disoriented.

Although there is still a debate about the role of the Cao Đài Armed Force during the 1940s and 1950s, it was apparent that it was effective in protecting the religion, the Caodaists, and the people in the communities from brutal and fatal attacks by both the French and revolutionary political forces. In regions controlled by the Cao Đài Armed Force, people felt safe and secure, as their agricultural production and manufacturing activities could continue without being disrupted by armed conflicts and political militias (Fall 1955; Perrin 2011).

After the Vietnam War ended in 1975, the general feeling was that the Vietnamese people did not have a bright future, under the new government's

centrally planned economy and closed-door policy. The poor faced a number of spiritual and economic crises as well as annual natural disasters such as floods and droughts, and their lives deteriorated.

In this hopeless situation, Caodaists did their best to help. The Charitable Body and the local Cao Đài Administration Boards together put their resources at the disposal of the dispossessed, particularly peasants in rural areas (Jammes 2016, 251).

Throughout different phases of Vietnamese history, the Cao Đài Charitable Body offered the advantage of being locally organized in each community. The Caodaists knew the affairs of the villages, and cared for them. During the French period, those peasants who had lost their land to French or pro-French landowners found work at the Cao Đài farming and manufacturing activities. They also joined the Caodaist farming groups in clearing the forests and creating new farms for themselves. Those who had lost their houses or were too poor to build a house of their own were helped to build homes by the Charitable Body. In case of natural disasters or accidents, the Caodaists were often the first in the community to assist them mentally and psychologically to overcome their crises.

Due to abundant financial resources from the agriculture, business activities, and donations, all the main events in the community—different celebrations, marriages, funerals, and rites—were taken care of by the Caodaists free of charge. Widows were taken to the nursing homes run by the Caodaists, while homeless children or orphans were cared for in orphanages or adopted by Caodaists. In addition, the Caodaists opened philanthropic clinics and schools. There were more than 20,000 students studying free of charge in schools run by Caodaists in the early 1970s. In each Cao Đài community, the Caodaists reserved a large Caodaism-owned plot of land for burying the dead free of charge (Huan n.d).

The Executive Body of each local Cao Đài temple took care of the spiritual and mental health of each community, while the Caodaists from the local Charitable Body took care of the material lives of the underprivileged people, from cradle to grave.

In present-day Vietnam, there are more than 475 Cao Đài communities of approximately five million Cao Đài followers. And thus, there are about 475 Cao Đài Charitable Bodies operating in parallel to the Executive Body in each locality,

with even a stronger social impact on the community than before. Although a large number of agricultural lands, properties, and business facilities were confiscated by the new government after 1975, charity activities could continue thanks to donations from the community. Cao Đài charitable activities now focus on building homes for the underprivileged and assisting the victims of natural disasters. In the meantime, ritual ceremonies for all life incidents such as engagement, marriage, funerals, and other local cultural events are still conducted by the local Caodaists, keeping Caodaism as part of the traditional culture in each locality.

Conclusion

Sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) believed that religion is mostly about community, and could link people together and generate social cohesion (Durkheim 1912). Religion can also promote principled and consistent behavior, and offer strength to the populace during their transitions and tragedies (Little and McGivern 2014, 473). Caodaism may be viewed as having fulfilled its religious role by bringing about social coherence, and social control as well as meaning and purpose to many Vietnamese.

Caodaism's Executive Body and Charitable Body became, and remain, reliable institutions on which many Vietnamese can lean. While the dignitaries of the Executive Body take care of the people's spirituality, those in the Charitable Body care for their material life.

Traditionally, the Cao Đài Charitable Body was a well-organized institution, with religious ranks equivalent to those in the Executive Body. That a Caodaist achieved a religious rank in the Charitable Body meant that his or her contribution to the religion and the community was appreciated. Spiritually, this accumulation of virtues would be counted as one among different ways to escape the cycle of karma.

A large network of charitable bodies in all communities of the Caodaists helped bring Caodaism closer to the people, making Cao Đài religious activities part of their daily lives and at the same time their daily lives part of the Caodaists' concern and care. The Charitable Works have helped the Caodaists reach their three objectives, "Life Protection, Benevolence, and Universality," and mobilize

a large number of human and financial resources for religious and charitable activities.

The Caodaists live, work, and go through crises together with the community in each city or village where they operate. Therefore, they find it easy to understand what sufferings or difficulties in life the local people meet, and promptly offer support, both spiritually and materially. In addition, even if proselytization is not the aim of the Charitable Body, the dedication, benevolence and enthusiasm brought about by many Caodaists has led many who have encountered their charitable work to convert to the religion, in times of both war and peace.

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