CONSTRUCTING THE CORNUCOPIA THAT IS CAODAISM: THEMES OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION IN AN INCREASINGLY ACEPHALOUS MILIEU

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Introduction

In this chapter I will trace a trajectory of particular cultural production that is approximately eighty years long. It is the story of a Vietnamese new religious movement that seeks to present itself as architecturally distinct from the general aesthetic milieu of Vietnamese sacred architecture, and yet also to proclaim that it is the consummation of several millennia-long traditions of that nation’s (and the world’s) religious quest for an ultimate unity of purpose nestled within the sacred. The cultural production of Caodaist architecture goes through a number of stages in this period, but perhaps the most fascinating is the continued development and spread of an architectural model that arises despite the decapitation of the formal bureaucracy of this faith by the Communist government after 1975. Since this period, Caodaist architectural cultural production has taken on a number of added roles amongst the Vietnamese diaspora, which include the amelioration of homesickness and the need to absorb anxieties about a lack of official institutional direction. This chapter focuses on the Sydney Caodaist community, not only because it is one solid, working example of a Caodaist community in exile, but also because it was one of the first outside Vietnam to complete a purpose-built temple to Đức Cao Đài [God]. Thus I will demonstrate the strong links between community development, the topography within which a community can find itself as a new religion, and the nature of the motivation and changes in style to religious cultural production. Caodaism is of note in this process, because of its recent acephalous status.

Cornucopia As Theme and Methodology

Caodaism is a religion that self-identifies as a syncretic system, bringing together the religious traditions of the world for the next stage of religious development (known by Caodaists as the “Third Amnesty between God
and Humanity’). This period will be characterised by a global consciousness rather than a tribal, local or national understanding of the world. In this sense there is a focus on certain religious doctrines that have developed as a core part of the history of the movement since its foundation in 1926, but technically all historical developments have the potential to be a part of the ongoing manifestation of this faith. That is, there is the sense of an inexhaustible supply of material upon which the future of the religion can draw, and thus a similarly inexhaustible supply of lenses through which it can be understood by both adepts and academics. Sergei Blagov makes this quite clear; “[t]he great thing about studying Caodaism is that you are almost always right. No matter what crackpot theory you happen to be expounding on any point, you can always find support for your hypothesis in the vast expanses of Caodaist history and doctrines” (Blagov 2001: xi). This oversupply of doctrines informs my use of the idea of a cornucopia in place and time, that allows the contextualisation of the development of Caodaist architecture in relation to its theology, that is, the symbology of universalism always represents an aesthetic oversupply of possibilities.

I use the term ‘cornucopia’ as it relates generally to the mythical horn of plenty that emerged in late antiquity (Latin, cornu copiae). The horn represented abundance and was linked to several Greek and Roman deities including Zeus and Ceres (Boccaccio 2011: 727). In this chapter the word is employed in a more specific fashion. In the time of colonial oppression and economic hardship which marked the background to the founding of Caodaism in 1926, the cornucopia of theologies and of produce (flowers, fruit, other sundry comestibles displayed in temples and at festivals) was a collective performance of abundance that stood in contrast to those Vietnamese communities who could not collectively pool and display such an abundance. In this way ‘cornucopia’ serves in this chapter as a concept that links to the performance of abundance despite economic hardship and the threat of political (and colonial) repression. Rather than seeing this as a device of empowerment, most commentators on the Caodaist aesthetic have focused on this aspect of the religion to only in a pejorative light, describing art, architecture and multiple syncretic theologies as something ghastly, or in one commentator’s words, kitsch and überladen (Hartney 2003: 38ff). The actuality of Caodaist theology and architecture represents a tension that rises from not being able to physically express every aspect of the potentiality of the faith; scripture, ritual and architecture yearn to say every possible thing about the sacred. Yet assessments of Caodaism must focus on those aspects of the religious life of the world.