

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

REVIEW ESSAY

Contemporary Vietnamese Religions: From the Early Modern Period to Ultra-Modern Expressions

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George E. Dutton. *A Vietnamese Moses: Philiphê Binh and the Geographies of Early Modern Catholicism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017.

Tâm T. T. Ngô. *The New Way: Protestantism and the Hmong in Vietnam*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016.

Janet Alison Hoskins. *The Divine Eye and the Diaspora: Vietnamese Syncretism Becomes Transpacific Caodaiism*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015.

Considered as a whole, the twentieth century was, in the words of British Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, an age of extremes that gave rise to misguided utopias and historicisms (1994). Vietnam, for its part, experienced political violence through its anti-colonial struggle, nationalist and Communist revolutions, and national division before peace and reunification led the country first on the path of a triumphant socialism, and then on the more pragmatic and realistic path of *đổi mới* (renovation). In the space of three decades, corresponding to a generation, Vietnam experienced enormous changes through economic development, demographic expansion, rural exodus and urbanization, and the integration of the country into the main regional and international organizations (such as ASEAN, APEC, the WTO, and the Security Council of the United Nations). The party-state still vigilantly patrols the main orientations of Vietnamese society, thanks to a monopolistic practice of power that draws legitimacy from its functions as guarantor of territorial integrity, national cohesiveness, and social stability. Social behavior, cultural activities, and everyday life are continuously evolving, while becoming less conformist.

Nonetheless, Vietnamese citizens are well aware of the clear distinction within society, and hence within their own lives, between the public and private spheres.

How have these past upheavals and current transitions affected religious life in Vietnam? *Đổi mới* only indirectly affected the spiritual domain—more precisely the status of religions in Vietnamese society and the nature of their relationships with a socialist state that always recognized the freedom to believe or not believe. Some changes were already discernible from the first socioeconomic transformations, the opening of the country, the mobility of overseas Vietnamese, and, finally, a global context in which the programmed secularization of modern democratic societies and the willed secularism of former socialist countries (including the People’s Republic of China) were called into question by a so-called religious revival.

Resolution 24 of the Vietnamese Communist Party of 1990 overturned the paradigm that had been operating in the fields of religious policy, spiritual life, and scientific knowledge. In acknowledging that, “for a part of the population, religion is a moral necessity that has existed for a long time, that will continue to exist for a long time, and that follows the same path as the nation and socialism,” this resolution began to withdraw from state atheism and recognize the historical nature, social utility, and vital pluralism of religions. New debates erupted concerning the definition of “religions” and “beliefs,” and how these could loyally fit with the imperatives of Vietnamese national politics. The legal framework provided by the Ordinance of 2004 and the Law on Beliefs and Religions of 2016 seeks to clarify the policy of official recognition of religious organizations and the conditions for practicing religion with respect to fundamental liberties. These new conditions enabled the expansion of objects of study through a new classification of religious phenomena (institutionalized religions, indigenous religions, new religious movements, popular cults, and so forth) that was reinforced by a multidisciplinary approach.

Simultaneously, a new international academic interest in Vietnamese religious matters emerged. In order to jettison strictly Western conceptions of the “religious question,” an epistemological renewal has taken place over the last few decades. In the case of Vietnam, scholarship needed to be freed from three constraints: colonial domination, wartime politicization of religious forces, and the bureaucratization of religious organizations since the establishment of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. There has been a redefinition of theoretical and institutional frameworks for research on religious studies, as well as increased international

cooperation. The field of religious studies remains, of course, subject to numerous ideological constraints, whether that pressure emanates from the state, from religious communities, or from international organizations within civil society. Access to sources and fieldwork research is often difficult or limited, but the vitality of religious life in Vietnam is undeniable. Membership in religious organizations is increasing, impressive new temples are being built, and debates swirl around new spiritual practices. As a result, religion is no longer a marginal topic that is solely concentrated on relations with the state. Religion has again become a social fact—a focus of scholarly interest within the social sciences and humanities—as shown by the historiographical evolution of the field, and, specifically, by the three works under review here.

By tracing the fate of a Vietnamese Jesuit who left for Lisbon at the end of the eighteenth century to ask for the maintenance of his order and community in Tonkin, George Dutton shows that transnational religious interactions already existed more than two centuries ago and that globalization is not as contemporary as is believed. Tâm T. T. Ngô (Ngô Thị Thanh Tâm) shows the internal dynamics of this religious vitality by focusing on the conversion of Hmong to evangelical Protestantism, while Janet Hoskins details the external dynamics of Caodaism in the diaspora. Ngô and Hoskins describe interactions between national and overseas religious communities that modify traditional religious geographies through the deterritorialization of religious practice. This description of religious mobility by social anthropologists should not obscure the contribution of historical research to our understanding of religious phenomena, including the most current ones.

A Vietnamese Moses: Philipphê Bình and the Geographies of Early Modern Catholicism

A historian at UCLA, George Dutton is one of the rare specialists who utilizes both local and contemporary sources to examine eighteenth-century Vietnam. This especially turbulent period saw the end of the conflict between the Nguyễn and Trịnh realms and, of particular importance, the emergence of the Tây Sơn dynasty. It was also a key moment in the intensification of contacts between Europe and Asia. Historians have all too often read these contacts as establishing, a posteriori, a causal link with modern colonialism.

In his new monograph, *A Vietnamese Moses*, Dutton examines a period that could be considered the last episode in the transformation of the premodern state. With this in mind, he rereads a page in the religious history of Vietnam—the story of the expansion of Christianity in Asia—from a

new perspective, focusing on Philiphê Bình (1759–1832), a figure well known to scholars of Catholicism. Telling Bình’s story requires delving into social history and, one could say, global history. The author does this by joining a pertinent reflection on the overlap between several “Catholic geographies” to the definition of a “new mapping” (12) of Đại Việt. Dutton does not just propose an alternative view of missionary history to the one that is dominated by the overwhelming figure of Mgr. Pigneau de Behaine, bishop of Adran. Instead, he demonstrates the agency of Vietnamese converts (252) in a connected history, analyzing the multiple interactions between Europe and Asia and thus enlarging our knowledge of the history of Asian Catholicism. Taking inspiration from economic historian Sanjay Subramanyam (2004), his colleague at UCLA, Dutton retraces a history that links the Red River, rather than the Ganges, to the Tagus. In so doing, Dutton displays his fine understanding of the political context and internal tensions that roiled Vietnamese society during the second half of the eighteenth century (especially during the Tây Sơn uprising of 1771–1802), both of which he considers at the level of the center and the village (the impact of the distinct religious policies of the Nguyễn and Trịnh rulers, the return to Confucian orthodoxy under the Tây Sơn). He describes this situation in parallel with the politico-religious troubles that tore apart Christian Europe—in particular the Portuguese monarchy, which was in conflict with the Vatican concerning the issue of patronage, the redefinition of missionary activities by the papacy, and the suppression of the Society of Jesus, or Congregation of the Jesuits, in 1773, in addition to being a victim of the Napoleonic expansion.

More than a simple autobiography by an exemplary religious destiny, the notebooks of Philiphê Bình recount the remarkable experience of a Vietnamese Christian who left his village near the mouth of the Thái Bình River in Tonkin to renew his connection with the congregation of his heart. After a long journey with many stops, Father Bình finally reached Portugal, where he lived for about forty years of his life and died in 1832. In eight chapters, Dutton skillfully relates the spiritual quest—the mission—of this first Vietnamese Jesuit through fresh eyes. He presents a precise analysis of original documents housed in various locations (Lisbon, the Vatican, Paris, and Vietnam), in particular the complete manuscripts of Bình himself. The existence of these manuscripts has been known since they were discovered in the Vatican in the 1960s, but Vietnamese Catholic historians have only partially exploited them, often from a hagiographic perspective. Dutton produces a far more panoramic analysis that opens a window onto the history of cultural and religious contacts and the representations of the Western world of

a Vietnamese priest living in Lisbon, or “how Vietnamese now understood their place in the world” (2). This priest also made a contribution to the history of Vietnamese Catholic textuality, enabling a cross reading of texts in Latin, demotic script (*hán nôm*) and romanized script (*quốc ngữ*), and colloquial Portuguese. He also contributed to the intellectual history of Vietnam. Besides texts about linguistics, theology, and liturgy, Binh penned other writings (notes, diaries, and tales) that are rich in descriptions and eyewitness accounts and that could profitably be mined by historical anthropologists. These writings trace the training of an intellectual who was able to describe his impressions in prose (*quốc ngữ*) and in “travel poetry” (*nôm*, 68), using several languages and scripts.

Philiphê Binh compared himself to Moses undertaking the exodus to respond to God’s call (167). His was a far longer “journey to the West” than that of the seventh-century Chinese monk Xuanzang, whose aim had been to bring the sacred texts of Buddhism home from India. At stake were the preservation of the legacy of the first Jesuit evangelization by the Portuguese (*đạo Hoa Lang*), which Binh accomplished by defending the *padroado* (patronage) community and the continuation of ecclesiastical training that was in decline. Binh was also interested in questions concerning liturgy, such as the wearing of hats and free confessions under the new administrative and religious authority that the papacy, through the growing power of the Propagatio Fide, assigned to apostolic vicars sent by the Missions Etrangères de Paris (MEP) (50).

Binh’s mission was thus undertaken in the name of a community reacting to the suppression of the Jesuit order by clinging to loyalism, a community that was ready to provoke a schism in order to preserve its autonomy by appealing to the legitimacy of patronage while rivalries between religious orders, missionary societies, and nations were surging in Europe. The pages in Dutton’s *A Vietnamese Moses* that deal with the community’s refusal to accept a standardized translation of the Christian lexicon (51–57, 122–123) are particularly riveting. They illustrate how popular attachment to certain rituals and forms of religious discourse crystallized orthodoxies and orthopraxies and could be the basis of a defiance that was not necessarily connected to theological controversies or disregard for ecclesiastical hierarchy. Through his travels, Binh became conscious of belonging to universal Christianity, to a “global religious community” (4). In the Bible, he discovered an imagined ancestry and a mental cartography that

was no longer limited to his native Tonkin or to the Confucianized world. That new enlarged mental cartography led him to reconceptualize East and West in a world conceived as a whole.

As a newly ordained priest in 1793, Philiphê Binh decided, after working for a year against a background of insurrections and religious violence, to embark on the “difficult path of resistance” (62) and go to Europe in search of reinforcements. The preliminary stages of his long journey involved going first to Macau and then to Malacca and Goa to find material support for further travel and, above all, to obtain the necessary accreditations from local Catholic representatives. Donations from his faithful and commercial transactions enabled Binh and three fellow Catholics (Thome Nhân, Phanchico Ngàn, José Trung) to reach Macau, where they had to abandon their plans to obtain accreditation after being refused by Procurator Letondal in Malacca and Archbishop Santa Catarina in Goa. Obstinacy and even transgressive activities by Binh allowed the group to finally embark on a British ship in 1796. The journey to Saint Helena was epic. It would have been interesting to learn whether the travelers held discussions with that vessel’s mostly Anglican crew, or with the partly Muslim (“*cuan Mauro*,” 95) crew of the Portuguese ship they later boarded. On July 24, 1796, Binh’s group finally reached Lisbon. They discovered an immense global city, an intellectual center where the rhythms of daily life were dictated by Catholicism and where they were thus able to live their faith in full. Binh was recognized as a priest by the patriarch of Lisbon and shaved his head.

By becoming Felipe Binh do Rosario, he accepted the process of acculturation. It is difficult to know, however, what Father Binh thought of the tensions within Portuguese Catholic society, in particular of those between the Oratorians and the Jesuits regarding questions of education, or whether he was aware that the Portuguese church was increasingly challenged by the spirit of Enlightenment and the rise of skepticism. Yet the debates on religious matters that Binh engaged in with his fellow Vietnamese and other interlocutors are fascinating.

The ultimate goal of the journey—to secure an opportunity at the Portuguese court to plead for the appointment of a bishop for the Jesuit community in northern Vietnam—was achieved through an audience with Prince Dom João. Although Binh was impressed by the solemnity of the event, he was nonetheless concerned about the stability of the Portuguese monarchy vis-à-vis other European nations and the papacy. Could he succeed in obtaining through numerous petitions the much-hoped-for appointment of a bishop in Tonkin? After five years of effort, an October 1801 decree assigned the Franciscan Ignacio Galdino to that post, but

the intransigence and particularism of the Jesuits challenged the decision to the point of nullifying it. Galdino was thus sent to Macau with the mission to reintegrate the dissidents, through force if necessary, with the help of the apostolic vicar of Eastern Tonkin, Ignacio Clemente Delgado (174–175). Binh also failed in his attempt to meet Pope Paul VII, who had promoted a project to establish diplomatic links with Gia Long, founder of the Nguyễn dynasty in 1802. Fearing new persecution by the new Nguyễn dynasty, Binh reiterated his request for a Portuguese bishop but received a new refusal from the Portuguese court, which was eventually forced by the Napoleonic Wars into exile in Brazil in 1807.

Faced with the dilemma of whether to stay in order to accomplish his mission or to return in order to protect his native community, and feeling more and more isolated after the deaths of his companions, Felipe Binh do Rosario managed nonetheless to maintain contact with his community at home through letters and printed pamphlets. The “leader of the community” (166) thus strove to maintain hope, however tenuous, among his fellow Catholics in Vietnam, who fed on his testimonies and “parallel stories” (161), despite delays in their transmission between Lisbon, Macau (where a handful of Jesuits had settled), and Tonkin. Finally, in 1805, after three decades of resistance by a small group of intransigent Jesuit followers, the schismatic situation in Tonkin seemed to have been resolved. The community got back into line.

As for Binh, he essentially became an exile. Now ensconced at the Casa do Espirito Santo, he lived like a true native of Lisbon (Dutton speaks of “a diasporic person” who emancipates himself, 192–194), cut off from his culture and mother tongue after the death of Brother Trung in 1824. In Lisbon, he assumed the responsibilities of priesthood, interpreted the Napoleonic Wars in light of the Tây Sơn uprising, and, most of all, described the modern nature of his daily life (204). This lifestyle allowed him to learn, read, and write in a freer manner than before. He would not renew his interest in poetry, the best way to express his sincere happiness and hope, until the restoration of the Society of Jesus in 1814, which was a new disappointment. He seems to have been interested in the religious controversies that shook Europe and in learning more about secular forms of knowledge, topics about which this reader would have liked to learn more.

Felipe Binh do Rosario, one of the first true promoters of *quốc ngữ* (the romanized script devised by Portuguese merchants and missionaries in the seventeenth century, though attributed to Alexandre de Rhodes) in the late eighteenth century (220), left a precious legacy.

His body of texts centered on his religious experiences and the history of his community allows us to follow how his thinking evolved through new areas of interest and new writing techniques; this evolution covered topics such as the position of the individual as expressed through the pronoun *tôi*, the conception of time, a distancing from Chinese culture, and reflections on Biblical and secular ontologies. Dutton perfectly summarizes the innovative contribution of this “linguistic mediator” (244).

The New Way: Protestantism and the Hmong in Vietnam

Tâm T. T. Ngô (Ngô Thị Thanh Tâm) is an anthropologist of religions at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen, Germany. Her monograph *The New Way: Protestantism and the Hmong in Vietnam* is a revised version of her PhD dissertation on Vietnamese Hmong conversion to evangelical Protestantism.

Evangelical Protestantism in Southeast Asia has been underdocumented when compared with the decades-long research on Africa and Latin America that helped define evangelism outside the West. In addition, the Vietnamese situation has some unique features. The first is connected to Vietnam’s colonial past and to its struggle between two Frances—one Catholic, the other secular—that gave a nearly exclusively Catholic character to evangelism and even to Christianity. For many decades, the “Christian cult” mentioned in Franco-Vietnamese treaties kept the meaning of “Catholic” implicit. One must wait for the late effects of the Second Awakening and the arrival of the first North American societies, especially the Christian and Missionary Alliance, and the legal recognition in 1929 of evangelical activity on Vietnamese soil (more precisely the French protectorates of Annam and Tonkin) for the “Christian cult” to take on a more extensive scope. Vietnam’s second particular feature is connected to the proselytizing activities that took place in the south during the Vietnam War and produced an asymmetrical practice of Protestantism until the 1990s. Protestantism was residual in the Red River Delta but widespread south of the 17th parallel. Since 2000, Protestantism has become one of the principal challenges to the Vietnamese authorities. As a result, they have sought to adapt their religious policies and have taken measures, including legal ones, to provide a framework for the activities of Protestant denominations, notably by Christian Protestant ethnic minorities (decree no. 22 of 2005).

Recalling the complex situation of Protestantism only underscores, for anyone unfamiliar with conducting fieldwork in Vietnam, the exceptional nature of Ngô's study. Few people besides Ngô could have met the necessary conditions for conducting such ethnographic research, becoming accepted by local Vietnamese authorities and, later, by a Hmong family. The difficulty of access is due to several causes: geostrategic (this is a mountainous area bordering China); ethnolinguistic (involving a minority population whose language was only recently unified and transcribed); sociopolitical (defiance of the local populations toward both the state and the Vietnamese nation); historical (psychological and material legacies of guerrilla warfare, exodus to neighboring countries and to the United States at the end of the Indochina War); and religious (superimposition or substitution of Pentecostalism onto Hmong messianism).

The introduction of *The New Way* clearly lays out the state of the field, conditions for participant observation, and methodological instruments used by the author—in particular her ongoing reflection on language, translation, and semiotics. It might have been useful to specify, from a theological and missiological perspective, the form of evangelical Protestantism currently practiced by the Hmong. The author relates the debates that arise between Communism and evangelicals, as well as between nation building and evangelism. Her excellent reflection throughout the entire work on temporalities, shamanism, and millenarianism could have been lengthened to include comparisons with secular and religious forms of contemporary messianism. This is, in fact, evoked by an informant who recalls how some of his relatives doubted “the timeline of expectations” (Koselleck [1990] 2004) of socialism: “They didn't believe in the future that socialism could bring to them” (40), leading them to prefer conversion to Pentecostalism, often in the guise of public confession.

If this reader understands correctly Ngô's reference to the revolutionary messianism of Hòa Hảo (91), it would have been helpful to delve more deeply into the different forms of millenarianism that arose in the entire highland massif (Zomia), in order to illustrate political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott's observation that Christianity was perceived as a “powerful alternate, and to some degree oppositional, modernity” (95). One thinks in particular of the Saya San rebellion in Burma, of Phu Mi Bun and charismatic monks in Northeast Thailand, or even of the Python God cult in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Such an ethnogeographical comparison between the highlands of the center and of the northwest would also help readers better understand, in the context of current religious policy, the different processes

of affiliation, past and present, of house churches and local churches to the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (50). It would also help us better understand the conversion of the forty thousand Hmong who have migrated from the north to the Central Highlands (97).

The author develops her analysis on three different levels, capitalizing on her competence in cultural, religious, and political anthropology. At the local level, her ethnographic research—conducted over a long period of time in the Hmong language in different localities in order to produce “thick descriptions”—has focused on religious practice and conversion, considering religion “alongside other cultural media” (6) as a source of cultural support or as “a comprehensive system of socialization and support” (71). This allows the author to relativize the sometimes zealous discourses on faith, missionary activities, or certain forms of innovation that Protestantism claims to introduce into religious life (Biblical readings, listening to FEBC radio programs, and hymnology, 55–60), and hence into the daily life of the converts that is altered as a result. This is the meaning of the New Way (*kevcai tshiab*).

At the national level, the author analyzes the inflections of the state’s anti-superstition policy on anti-conversion measures and on the recognition of churches, the permanent features of the regulation of Vietnamese religious life (pre-registration of activities, police surveillance). This allows Ngô to assess the ideological and cultural challenges that the expansion of neo-Pentecostalism in sometimes highly acculturated forms represents for the Vietnamese state. The millenarian revival thus gave birth to the “Vàng Chứ religion” (84–90), presenting a challenge to the state but also to evangelical Christianity, which “although apocalyptic in nature, does not recognize Hmong millenarianism” (101).

Faced with such oppositional dynamics, the socialist regime put in place various strategies to bring the region out of its economic isolation through successive emulation campaigns (27). While the state promotes a particular understanding of “modernity” on the national scale, churches advocate an alternative one to that of rationality and efficacy, an understanding of conversion (theology of prosperity) that is at once moral (virtuous behavior), ritual (burning of ancestors’ altars), and material (empowerment).

Finally, at the supranational level, the author develops a theoretical reflection on religious globalization and its networks, correctly describing the Hmong situation as “doubly transnational” (62). The first transnational wave brought the Hmong from southern China to Southeast Asia; the second, which reactivated messianism, brought them from the Indochinese

peninsula to Western countries, especially to the United States. This phenomenon can thus be interpreted both as a symptom of the reinforcement of identities and as a means of integration within exile. It also gave rise to new missionary vocations that function to authenticate faith, maintain links with the homeland in the form of underground missions (64), and bring modernity or arguments in defense of religious freedom to Vietnam.

When discussing the figure of the missionary, Tâm Ngô writes: “Most of our knowledge today of protestant missions in Southeast Asia is limited to research on those that took place in the colonial and neocolonial era” (64). While we indeed still lack research on clandestine missions in the postcolonial era that would help us better understand the speed and intensity of evangelical expansion today, we must bring some nuance to the discussion of the origins of Protestantism in Southeast Asia. If we do not want our “knowledge” to be based entirely on simplistic contemporary accounts or the writings of insiders, a whole program of critical history is needed to establish the continuous presence of Protestantism in Southeast Asia, beginning with the implantation of the first mainstream churches, followed by the activities of Western evangelical missionary societies, and then the ramification from an organizational and theological perspective of numerous denominations and independent churches that were both interconnected but also in competition with one another. Over time, this produced an evangelical enmeshment whose modes of operation via transcontinental networks (the contribution of European, but especially American, Protestantism) as well as intra-Asia circulations (agency of indigenous churches) remain to be studied.

Tâm Ngô finally shows the iterative effects of mobility between local and overseas communities on the relationship of the Hmong with their traditions, on communal or “global Hmong” identity (120), on moral values, and on the empowerment of the individual with specific reference to youth, women, and conjugal relationships, whether the individual has converted or not or has even deconverted (4). In fact, one-third of Vietnamese Hmong, or about 300,000 individuals, have converted since the 1980s, and their affiliation is sometimes volatile. In her fine-grained analysis of local realities and the globalization of religion, Tâm Ngô has delivered an important contribution to Hmong and Vietnamese studies, the study of religion, Southeast Asian ethnography, and globalized evangelical Protestantism.

The Divine Eye and the Diaspora: Vietnamese Syncretism Becomes Transpacific Caodaism

Janet Hoskins is a professor of anthropology at the University of Southern California who is known for major works on the representation of time and space, ancestral cults, material culture, and the persistence of ritual within the postcolonial societies of Sumba in Eastern Indonesia. In 2003, she discovered a Cao Đài temple near her residence in Pomona, California. This was followed by reading an old article by political scientist Bernard B. Fall. These encounters led her to become interested, one might say in reverse and from a marginal perspective, in the question of religion in Vietnam. In other words, Hoskins started in the land of resettlement and returned to the sources of the movement she studied. The first stage of her research produced an interesting documentary film on the transplantation of Caodaism in California. The rich monograph under review is the fruit of more than ten years of research and interviews. It is structured around three key concepts: “transpacific connection,” “explicit syncretism” versus “outrageous syncretism,” and “diaspora.” These concepts are elaborated on in the introduction and in the concluding chapter.

Hoskins devotes her study to the implantation and then organization of Cao Đài communities in Southern California within the larger context of the exodus of millions of boat people and political refugees since the late 1970s. She thus seeks to highlight the contemporary dynamics of Caodaism from an original perspective—from the place that is at once the farthest geographically from its original location and the most recent point of extension—in order to illustrate how it “reshape[s] its goals in a globalized world” (4). This process is not simply associated with the forced migration overseas of the faithful and dignitaries; it also expresses a claim to universal salvation that was inherent in the founding of Caodaism. Caodaism’s implantation within the diaspora (a religion *in* diaspora) is somewhat analogous to the initial founding of Caodaism, as it was in essence already diasporic (a religion *of* diaspora).

Since its founding in 1926, this new religious movement originating in southern Vietnam has been the object of numerous studies. Hoskins even writes of a “new religious field” (14) to describe Cao Đài’s challenge to both Catholic exclusivism and the colonial state. Earlier research has sought to determine the nature and the religious sources of Caodaism by reordering its new elements, which were drawn from various traditions (Chinese sectarian movements; the Three Teachings or harmonious aggregate of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism serving as a repertory of diverse religiosities on the path to institutionalization; Buddhist messianism; the

reaction against Christian evangelization; and new Western occultism). These studies sought to trace the logic of Cao Đài rhetoric and ritual practices. Other studies have sought to chronicle or explain the motivations behind the politico-religious engagements of Cao Đài leaders and faithful during the colonial era, the war of independence, and the period from the Cold War until the reunification of the country. Since the 1990s, new research has been published in Vietnam and overseas, either to reactivate knowledge about the history of this religion (through reappropriating the concept of “religion” following the works of anthropologist of secularism Talal Asad), or to produce an ethnography of current religious practices, more precisely of the religious practices of Cao Đài’s different branches. These accounts show the effects of a double pressure. One is a pressure from the regulatory state, which seeks to impose a legal framework for practicing religion in conformity with patriotic values and in recognition of the sovereignty of the party. The other pressure stems from the quest for legitimacy by the various Cao Đài branches and communities that is expressed in their efforts to preserve and transmit—through liturgical, experiential, and initiatory forms—a religious knowledge and a tradition that connect them back to the very origins of Caodaism.

Hoskins offers a globalized panorama of Caodaism by exploring from a theoretical perspective the relationship between Caodaism and diaspora. This theme has already been studied by scholars in Australia and even France (cf., Hartney 2004; Jammes 1998), but not to the same extent. *The Divine Eye and the Diaspora* focuses on the most visible, dynamic and extensive presence of Caodaism overseas; in other words, Caodaism as it is practiced in the Vietnamese diaspora on the West Coast of the United States. Hoskins makes a significant contribution to our understanding of Californian Caodaism, as a driving force of Caodaism’s networks and as a nerve center of Caodaism, when considered in the author’s terms as a “transpacific religion” (5).

What generalizations about the global nature of Caodaism can be drawn from this particular study? Could it open up new avenues of research on the comparative study of Caodaist revivalism in Vietnamese provinces? Above all, is the analytical framework anchored in the diaspora itself or in the transnational communities? If the latter, what transactions could validate this analysis? These questions go beyond the scope of Hoskins’s research, but addressing them could help define more precisely the meaning of “transpacific religion.” Utilizing non-Caodaist Vietnamese sources, both old and recent, could also help in evaluating certain statements by

cross-referencing representations and reinserting Caodaism into its original socioreligious terrain, specifically in southern Vietnam.

It might be more accurate to classify this study of Caodaism as practiced overseas as belonging to the rubric of Asian American religions, drawing its justifications as it does uniquely from discourses and testimonies of “religious virtuosi” (Weber 1978, 529–541), all of whom are intellectuals, and some of whom were involved in politics during the Vietnam War. This study in fact soundly recalls certain phenomena of acculturation (the “New Age as movement in the California religious field,” 64) and the importance of bilateral Vietnam–U.S. relations that are based on asymmetrical bases of memory and have intensified since the end of the embargo in 1995 through the circulation of goods, capital, and persons.

Hoskins develops her case through a series of paired biographies (34) of five founders and five followers who are now holders of religious authority and preservers of tradition. She draws out analogies and, ultimately, genealogies that are detached from the surrounding events and contexts in which they are enunciated. A historian might want to question the interpretive validity of the conjectures and the quest for unpublished and tangible traces of the past. But Hoskins has other objectives; she wishes on the one hand to make use of biography, of historical consciousness, of temporality—in short, of a certain form of historicity specific to anthropology (see de Certeau 1975; Ricoeur 1983–1985)—and on the other hand to employ the classic analysis of discourse and its postcolonial representation to explore structural phenomena rather than diachronicities.

The first pair of biographies links together the “invisible founder” (42) Ngô Van Chiêu and the “California medium” (59) Bùi Văn Khâm, allowing the author to place at the heart of the religious system the séances of spirit possession, meditation, and cenacles (discussion groups) that serve as sites of sociability and initiation. She rightly recalls that the colonial era was also the era of occultism that thus marked the “intersection of centuries of Asian occult practices with a modern, twentieth-century technique that was all the rage in Paris in the 1920s” (51). It would have been helpful to recall how southern Vietnam was crisscrossed by *ông đạo* (holy men)ⁱ and other prophetic figures; this would have helped to draw more precisely the “intense and forceful” figure of Chiêu (46), whom Hoskins compares with Krishnamurti, but who remains mysterious and difficult to define. Still, evoking Chiêu allows us to better understand the long spiritual quest of Vietnamese elites in diasporic conditions.

The figure of Phạm Công Tắc—perhaps the most famous Cao Đài dignitary, but also one of the more controversial due to his “utopian project”—enables Hoskins to discuss the question of authority in Caodaism, giving rise to conflicts over power (in particular, the case of Lê Văn Trung, 76) and memory in the routinization of charisma of function (Weber 1978, 246–254). Her study is based on an event that occurred in 2006 after decades of waiting: the transfer of the remains of the *hộ pháp* (head spirit medium) from Phnom Penh—where Phạm Công Tắc had taken refuge and died in 1959—to the Holy See in Tây Ninh in the context of growing religious freedom in Vietnam. This took place a few months before the integration of Vietnam in the World Trade Organization, while the country was still included in the very limited list of “Countries of Particular Concern” issued annually by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). As for Bùi Đắc Hùm, he is briefly presented as the principal translator of Cao Đài texts into English. He thus shares with Phạm Công Tắc the vocation to disseminate Caodaist exegesis from the overseas organization that he founded.

The third pair is based on a double lineage, both real and self-proclaimed. Trần Quang Vinh is invoked not because of his military past (although some aspects of his involvement are mentioned), but as the spiritual son of Victor Hugo, which he became in the 1930s while he was working in Cambodia and striving to create the first Cao Đài mission in that country. As for his own son, Trần Quang Cảnh, he is similarly the grandson of Victor Hugo, the eminent author who practiced spiritism at the end of his life. Trần Quang Cảnh has made it his mission to effect a reconciliation with the current government and to revitalize Caodaism by promoting a rapprochement with overseas missions. The integration of Cảnh into the official administration of the Tây Ninh branch makes for fascinating reading.

The section pairing Đỗ Vạn Lý and his father Đỗ Thuận Hậu (1887–1966), a great Taoist master, is the most innovative part of the book. It allows us to understand the religious background to this former diplomat’s conversion to Caodaism: the spiritual legacy of Đỗ Văn Lý’s father and the meaning the son attributed to a form of sacred nationalism. It describes as well his involvement in the unification of the various Cao Đài denominations in Saigon in the 1960s, a goal that he continued to pursue in California, where he resettled in 1975. He sought to explain this move from a theological perspective (149–152).

In another case of spiritual transmission between father and son, Lâm Lý Hùng inherited a religious tradition that he was able to preserve in its entirety in exile before returning to

Vietnam to relaunch the activities of the Tam Tông Miếu temple that his father, Âu Kiệt Lâm, a member of the pre-Cao Đài sect Minh Lý, founded in Saigon in the 1920s. While one can perceive the transmission of religious knowledge within this group of intellectuals, including in exile, it is harder to fully understand its relationship with different Cao Đài denominations and its negotiations with governmental authorities aimed at official recognition in 2008.

Chapter 6 offers an excellent description of new technologies, such as media (multilingual communications within Cao Đài networks), and new sites of religious practice—in particular, the semiotic innovation involved in the dissemination of spirit messages. Overseas, the internet has become a site of both exchanges and rivalries among different Cao Đài branches and organizations, while in Vietnam it is subject to very tight control and censorship. The author thus observes in the overseas context new developments of particular interest, such as the growing presence of women, the ordination of non-Vietnamese deacons, debates about temple architecture, and online conversions. Unfortunately, no statistics or even rough estimates are provided.

The book concludes with a theoretical essay on the transpacific globalization of Caodaism, bringing into dialogue the concepts of colonial syncretism and postcolonial diaspora. While this reader agrees fully with Hoskins's comment that "religion has played an important role in constituting the Vietnamese diaspora and policing its borders" (228), her claim that Caodaism is "first a religion of decolonization and second an emerging diasporic formation" (222) seems an overinterpretation. The past and multiform activities of Caodaism in fact reveal a much less univocal understanding of the political, social, and religious history of this religion and of contemporary Vietnam. As for the diasporic dimension, it is the expression of a given time and of the specific viewpoint of a Caodaist elite. The future will tell whether Cao Đài overseas will preserve these characteristics of exile and nostalgia or will evolve into a transnational religious community as a consequence of increased migration—or even whether it will internationalize as a result of the universalization of its message and religious practices.

Conclusion

The three works under review here each illustrate in their own way the renewed interest in "Vietnamese religions," but they share a few points of convergence. Through biographies, autobiographies, and testimonies, the individual occupies the central place. This also applies to

mobility, either in the form of temporary migration, exile, or religious appeals that bring out the existence of religious networks and multiple flows. These dynamics redefine the transnational religious spaces within which missionary activities can crisscross or even work against one another. One also sees how religious temporalities, especially in the context of millenarian beliefs, always challenge secular historicities and sacralities. In Vietnam, as elsewhere, it is by mobilizing the great categories of history—more specifically of the history of secularization and of the emergence of the modern concept of nation and its worldwide expansion (see van der Veer and Lehmann 1999)—that one should reposition the “religious question” using a multidisciplinary approach.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the field of study is no longer limited to “religions of Vietnam”—in other words, to autochthonous religions that emerged in the medieval era, such as the Three Teachings, or were maintained under the category of folk religions; in the premodern period with the introduction of Christianity; or in the colonial era with religious innovations and pluralism. The field has become so enlarged that one can speak of “Vietnamese religions.” This should be understood to mean not only the totality of liturgies that became indigenized in Vietnam, but also the religious practices of Vietnamese overseas who either implanted their native religions in their new homes or adopted new beliefs in acculturated forms. The globalization of religions renders this ensemble interconnected and sometimes interactive. The vitality of Vietnamese religions must thus be studied in the context of their multiple geographical implantations and must be analyzed through the perspective of modernity. It might be helpful to consider contemporary phenomena through the lens of “late modernity” (Giddens 1990) or “ultramodernity” (Willaime 1995) in order to better understand belief at the level of the individual, the persistence of religious identities supported by an autonomous religious history, and, finally, the political reaction at the national level to this religious globalization.

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Note

- 1 See in particular Tạ Chí Đại Trường (2001).

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