

The Symbol of The Divine Eye in Caodaism

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ABSTRACT: Caodaism is an indigenous religion that originated in the southern region of Vietnam in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Caodaism was formed through creative adaptation, selectively incorporating elements from existing major religions and indigenous beliefs within the community to develop its own distinct doctrine. The devotees of Caodaism worship the Divine eye (Heavenly Eye) as a symbol of the Divine, the Highest God (also known as Cao Đài Tiên Ông Đại Bồ Tát Ma Ha Tát), who is revered as the supreme ruler over all gods, saints, immortals, Buddhas, and the creator of the universe. In this article, the author will delve deep into researching the significance of the Divine eye symbol in Caodaism, shedding light on the religious teachings from an anthropological perspective on symbolism.

KEYWORDS: Caodaism, religion, The Divine eye, symbol

1. THESIS STATEMENT

In the early stages of human history, religious beliefs were manifested through the worship of symbolic representations, indicating a fundamental aspect of human spiritual life. Objects of worship may encompass animals, plants, natural phenomena, or objects symbolizing sacred meanings correlating with communal life as recognized by the community. As societies progress religions form complete ecclesiastical organizations with intricate doctrines and tightly-held beliefs, each closely associated with distinct symbols that serve as distinguishing markers among different religions. Beyond being mere cultural phenomena, symbols also serve as vehicles for conveying the content of culture or the teachings of religion. Caodaism (full name Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ) is an indigenous religion that originated in the southern region of Vietnam around the early 20th century. Presently, according to statistics provided by the Cao Đài Holy See in Tây Ninh, the number of adherents to this religion is estimated to exceed 3 million people, with over 500 temples established both domestically and internationally. Devotees of Caodaism believe that the Đức Cao Đài Tiên Ông Đại Bồ Tát Ma Ha Tát personally established the foundation of the faith through Divine revelation to save humanity, instructing the first disciples to paint the Divine eye as a sacred symbol of worship, reflecting both the cultural characteristics of the southern region, specifically, and Vietnam as a whole.

When discussing indigenous religions in Vietnam, Cao Đài is a religion that attracts considerable attention and research interest from scholars both domestically and internationally across various fields such as history, politics, culture, and religion... Including a notable research work by both domestic and international authors is: Initial exploration of Caodaism of Professor Đặng Nghiêm Vạn, examination of the historical and cultural aspects of Caodaism of Associate professor Nguyễn Thanh Xuân, study on Cao Đài and its relationships of Associate professor Huỳnh Ngọc Thu, *The Cao Đài: The Politics of a Vietnamese Syncretic Religious Movement* của Jayne S. Werner, *The Caodai: A new religious movement* của Sergei Blagov, *Histoire et Philosophie du Caodaise* của Gabriel Gobron and numerous other research works and articles by various authors, including materials compiled by Cao Đài religious authorities, serve as foundational references for the articles. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz argued that a religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (John Bowker, 2011, p. 13). Geertz's definition illustrates that the most significant aspect of religion is the significance of symbols, which serve to promote and sustain social relationships. Therefore, I believe that we can apply Geertz's theory of symbolic anthropology to explain the significance of the Divine eye symbol in Caodaism. Through this, we can partly understand more about the teachings, philosophy, as well as the role and function of this symbol in the lives of Caodaism devotees in Vietnam.

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2. CONTENT

2.1. The origin of the worship of the Divine eye symbol

When mentioning Cao Đài, people often associate it with the religious worship of the "Eye of God" known as the Divine eye. Because the Divine eye is the most revered symbol with the utmost sacred significance in this religion, it serves as the representative image of the Supreme Deity, the Jade Emperor God - The lord of the universe. In Caodaism, the Divine eye symbol is predominantly used in the architecture of the Holy See, with over 27 details depicting the Divine eye, and also in the attire of dignitaries during major ceremonies at the Holy See.

The worship of the Divine eye in Caodaism is recorded to be closely associated with the name of the first disciple, Mr. Ngô Văn Chiêu (1879-1932). He wanted to worship the Lord God, so he was advised by the Lord to choose an emblem for worship. Initially, Mr. Ngô Văn Chiêu intended to choose the symbol of the Cross (+) for worship, but the Lord God, through divine inspiration, suggested that this was the symbol of an existing religion (Christianity), so he had to think of a different new symbol, for which the Lord would assist him. A few days later, while pondering, Mr. Chiêu suddenly saw a very large eye appear, radiating a divine light, a few steps away from where he was sitting.

That eye was full of divine radiance, staring directly at him, which frightened him. He covered his face with both hands, too afraid to look, for about half a minute. When he opened his eyes again, he still saw that eye shining even more brightly. He clasped his hands and bowed, saying, "Dear Lord God! Your disciple is well aware of your mystical powers, please don't frighten me like this! If you insist on being worshipped in this manner, then please disappear instantly." (Đông Tân, 1967, page 72). After he finished his plea, the eye gradually blurred and then vanished.

However, Mr. Chiêu still didn't fully believe in the intentions of the God Lord, so he still didn't paint the eye for worship. A few days later, he once again saw the Divine Eye appearing just like before. As soon as he bowed with the Supreme Deity to request painting the Divine Eye for worship, the Divine Eye gradually blurred and then disappeared. Mr. Ngô Văn Chiêu, based on those two experiences, now fully trusted in the Divine and proceeded to paint the image of the Divine Eye exactly as he had seen it for worship. In January of the Year of the Rat (01/1924), when Mr. Ngô Văn Chiêu stood at Dinh Cậu Phú Quốc looking out to sea just as the sun was setting, he suddenly saw the Divine Eye shining brightly on a star, beneath which was the crescent moon, and above the sea was the sun, aligning along a vertical axis, while the sea formed a horizontal line. Captivated by this radiant and beautiful image, he immediately memorized and painted it exactly as he saw it for worship.

On the other hand, in the middle of 1925, the Divine ordered a group of civil servants to build an altar in Saigon, including Cao Quỳnh Diêu, Cao Quỳnh Cư, Phạm Công Tắc, Cao Hoài Sang, and later, they were joined by Mr Lê Văn Trung. The Divine instructed them to paint the image of the Divine eye for worship, but they were very hesitant and unsure of how to proceed, as the symbol of the Divine eye was completely new and unfamiliar to them. Up until that point, the Vietnamese people were only familiar with worshipping statues of Buddha, saints, and deities; they had never worshipped the Divine Eye before. Knowing that they were hesitant, the Divine descended to Mr. Ngô Văn Chiêu's house to provide guidance and instructed them to bring along the Đại Ngọc Cơ for the Divine to use in teaching them the task. As instructed by the Divine, they went to Mr. Ngô Văn Chiêu's house, where he guided them on how to worship the Divine using the symbol of the Divine eye, providing all the necessary details. Afterward, they eagerly prayed for the Divine's guidance and collaborated with Mr. Chiêu to prepare for the grand inauguration ceremony of Caodaism, with Mr. Chiêu entrusted with the important role of being the elder brother of the disciples. The worship of the Divine Eye in Caodaism originates from that event.

In the developmental trajectory of Caodaism, the symbol of the Divine Eye, revered as the principal icon within the Holy See and various Holy Temples, remains integral. When a devotee embraces the Supreme Being and seeks initiation into the Caodaist faith, they request the Divine Eye symbol adorned with images of Deities, Saints, Immortals, and Buddhas (collectively referred to as the Thánh Tượng Thiên Nhân) for worship within their household.

2.2. The significance of the symbol Divine Eye

It can be said that the symbol of the Divine Eye in Caodaism is not a novel emblem, as it has appeared in the ancient cultures and beliefs of several countries around the world. Since ancient Egyptian times (5000-4000 BCE), the Egyptians had chosen the eye as a symbol to worship the god Horus (the god of the sky with a falcon head, possessing protective and martial powers). The Egyptians believed that the two eyes of the god Horus belonged to the sun (right eye) and the moon (left eye). They equated the right eye of Horus with the sun god (Ra) and the left eye with the moon god (Thoth). With this belief, a single eye was designed as the primary symbol for the god Horus, signifying the full power of the God as the oldest among the gods and the "national god" (Minh Quang, 2011, p.115). Additionally, the symbol of the eye has also been referenced in a secret society known as the Freemasonry - a fraternal organization officially established in the small town of Warrington, England in 1646. This society admits enlightened and benevolent members to train each other through symbols and rituals in a secretive, non-religious manner aimed at the advancement of humanity towards perfection. In Dan Brown's work "The Lost Symbol," he refers to the number 13 and the "All-Seeing Eye" as symbols associated with the Freemasons, introducing intriguing new mysteries to be uncovered.

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In Caodaism, the Divine Eye is depicted as a left-eye-shaped symbol surrounded by radiant rays, embodying various philosophical and humanitarian meanings. To comprehend the significance of the Divine Eye, I provisionally categorize it into two explanatory approaches:

- Regarding the celestial doctrine, the Divine Eye symbolizes Heaven, representing the genesis of creation. The Divine Eye is depicted as a left-eye image, according to the traditional Eastern belief where the left side belongs to Yang, and the right side to Yin; in the cosmic order, Yang represents Heaven, while Yin represents Earth, hence choosing the symbol of the left eye for worship signifies the worship of Heaven. Drawing the Divine Eye with only one eye is to signify its sovereignty, singularity, and as the origin of creation; because, according to the "Dao" of Laozi, "The Dao gives birth to One, One gives birth to Two, Two gives birth to Three, Three gives birth to all things," and also "The One gives rise to the ten thousand things, the ten thousand things depend on the One for their existence." Therefore, the number 1 is the root, representing the Yang, which the Divine Majesty governs as the Supreme Yang, and the number 1 also signifies the Supreme Pole, the unique throne in the Cosmic Realm, the Jade Emperor.

In the Holy Teachings of the Caodaism, His Holiness instructs: "You understand the concept of 'the Divine residing within the eye'. Arrange it so that all adherents comprehend clearly. The origin of the Immortals, Buddhas lies therein" (Holy See of Tay Ninh, 1969, p. 12). According to this interpretation, the Divine Eye signifies the manifestation of the Divine within the Triple Gem of human beings. The human eye, being a physical organ, only perceives light or material colors. When individuals cultivate the Dharma, which means when Spirit, Energy, and Mind are harmonized, they will develop a third eye called the Divine Eye or Wisdom Eye. This is a spiritual faculty capable of perceiving colors, light in the invisible world that ordinary eyes cannot see.

In Caodaism, the Divine Eye symbolizes the conscience of humanity. In folk wisdom, there's a saying, "Heaven has eyes," meaning the Divine sees all actions and thoughts of every individual. Worshiping the Divine Eye entails venerating the eye of Heaven as a basis for self-reflection, refraining from wrongdoing. In the scripture "Jade Emperor Supreme God," there's a verse:

"Every wrongdoing shall be scrutinized meticulously,

All kinds of good and evil shall be fully observed."

(Holy See of Tay Ninh, 1992, p. 25)

It means that the Heavenly Throne (where "Throne" represents Heaven) is powerful, elevated, and luminous, overseeing all the good and evil deeds of all sentient beings, whether openly manifested or concealed within, the eyes of Heaven perceive them clearly, in order to reward or punish justly. Therefore, Caodaism adherents must always remember that whatever they do, Heaven sees through, unable to hide or deny later.

The Divine Eye symbolizes the soul, morality, and consciousness of human beings. His Holiness once descended to elucidate:

The eye sees the master of the mind,

The dual lights reign supreme,

Light sees the Divine,

The Divine sees the Heavens,

The Heavens are but reflections of the self.

(The eye is the master of the mind; Those two lights are the rulers; Light is the Divine; The Divine is Heaven; Heaven is none other than myself.)

(Holy See of Tay Ninh, 1969, p. 12)

In this context, the eye is indeed the expression of the human mind, yet the human mind itself is formless, imageless, immeasurable. However, its state is always reflected in the eyes, impossible to conceal. Western proverb mentions: "The eyes are the windows of the soul," which implies that the inner self of a person will be revealed through their eyes. The clarity of vision from both eyes is crucial, only through seeing can understanding be gained. Clarity of understanding is Divine, where the Divine in human beings is Heaven. Heaven is oneself (the Supreme God).

The Divine Eye symbolizes justice, sanctity, and universal compassion because there's a saying among the Saints: "Heaven sees, therefore our people see; Heaven hears, therefore our people hear" (Phan Tam Dai, 1964, p. 48). Caodaism recognizes all of humanity as siblings, undivided by skin color, ethnicity, or language. All human beings revere the Supreme God, who is formless and imageless; therefore, the choice of the Divine Eye allows any ethnic group in the world to depict and worship. It also aims for the harmonious unity of the God's children, fostering mutual compassion, and striving towards global solidarity.

2.3. The Divine Eye in the life of Caodaism devotees:

In the life of Caodaism devotees, the symbol of the Divine Eye plays an extremely important role and function. Most adherents understand that the Divine Eye is the embodiment of His Holiness, and wherever the symbol of the Divine Eye is present, it is considered the divine abode of the God. When a new disciple joins the faith, the first symbol they encounter is the Divine Eye. The newly initiated disciple must perform rituals at the Holy See or Holy Temple. In some places where facilities are not available, ceremonies can be conducted at home under the supervision of ordained clergy or respected adherents guiding the worship rituals before the Divine Eye statue. The most important detail in the initiation ceremony is that the new disciple is required to kneel and gaze directly at the Divine Eye to recite the Oath, thereby being officially recognized as a true believer by the community. After

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becoming a disciple, organizing ceremonies to invite the Divine Eye statue into one's home for worship is an important responsibility. The altar where the Divine Eye statue is placed must be positioned centrally within the house and at the highest point compared to other altars to assert the supremacy of the Supreme Deity. It is essential to ensure daily offerings and worship. Additionally, adherents are typically advised by ordained clergy to visit the Holy Temple daily or during leisure time to perform rituals together with the community.

Therefore, in the daily routine of a devotee, the presence of the Divine Eye symbol is constant. It resides within every household, where daily rituals involve at least one instance of gazing upon the symbol while offering incense. Additionally, during communal religious activities at temples, individuals collectively revere the Divine Eye symbol for an extended period while engaging in the Four-Times Daily Worship ritual. Gradually, the Divine Eye symbol becomes ingrained in the consciousness of the devotee as a habitual thought and a source of faith in the Savior. A devout follower once expressed, "During times of distress in my life, when I close my eyes and envision the Divine Eye of His Holiness, I feel reassured, as if the God is guiding and protecting me" (excerpt from the rural diary dated February 18, 2024).

For devotees who hold positions within the ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, their contact with the Divine Eye symbol is even more profound, continuous, and intimate. This is because the image of the Divine Eye is embroidered on the ecclesiastical attire of these positions. The ecclesiastical attire comprises robes, mantles, footwear, and select accessories tailored to specific roles within the Caodaism. Consequently, during religious rites, congregational gatherings, or ceremonial worship, Caodaism clergy don these garments adorned with the Divine Eye symbol, imbuing each act with sacred significance. It's no longer just ordinary attire but rather sacred vestments bestowed upon them, carrying the divine grace of the God upon the ecclesiastical attire. With this in mind, clergy often contemplate, "How can I act worthy of being an ecclesiastical member of the Holy See, a disciple of His Holiness, to fulfill His Holiness's commandments for the spiritual enlightenment of humanity" (excerpt from the rural diary dated February 18, 2024). Hence, every action, word, and gesture of the clergy while wearing the ecclesiastical attire adorned with the Divine Eye symbol is approached with caution and discipline.

The Divine Eye symbol also appears during the funeral rituals for devotees. When a devotee passes away, the coffin is draped with the Pall Cover, which is also a symbol of infinite love. The Divine Eye is a spiritual symbol with special and sacred significance for Caodaism devotees, as it embodies His Holiness and is often worshipped in Holy Temples and sanctuaries. The coffin houses the deceased's remains, typically associated with mourning and grief. However, the most "sacred" symbol of the religion (the Divine Eye) is often placed in distinguished and solemn places, yet it is also used to cover the coffin (the deceased's remains), symbolizing the love and humility of His Holiness. His boundless love for his children is so great that He does not hesitate to cover the humble coffin to provide protection for His offspring. Therefore, draping the Pall Cover over the coffin symbolizes the compassion and redemption of His Holiness for sentient beings from the time they are alive until they pass away. His Holiness cannot bear to be separated and holds His children close to His heart until the coffin is laid in the grave, and before the earth is filled, the Pall Cover is retrieved once again.

3. CONCLUSION

The Divine Eye symbol in Caodaism is a principal emblem, playing the supreme role in conveying most of the worldviews and beliefs of this religion. The Divine Eye symbolizes the omnipotent Supreme Deity – the creator of the entire cosmos and the common father of humanity. It also symbolizes the morality of human beings in their interactions with others, representing ultimate truth, unity, and love.

For the church, the Divine Eye symbol serves as the fundamental pillar upon which the doctrinal framework and rituals of the Caodaism were initially established. Following the identification of the Divine Eye symbol, other symbols were subsequently devised and refined to encompass the full spectrum of organizational aspects within the religion, contributing to its ongoing development. For adherents of Caodaism, the Divine Eye symbol holds unparalleled significance, profoundly influencing their lives from birth to death, and shaping the distinctive character of the Caodaism.

Symbols are not merely ordinary cultural phenomena but also serve as the fundamental foundation of a culture or religion. Therefore, to understand a religion, one must comprehend its symbols. The Divine Eye symbol in Caodaism is not just an image with meaning; it is also revered by followers who invest their innermost thoughts, emotions, and even pride in it. Engaging in daily ritual activities or receiving the sacraments within the religion with the presence of the Divine Eye symbol holds significant meaning for Caodaism adherents. It has become the connecting link between believers and the divine, as well as among believers themselves, fostering solidarity within the community of devotees.

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