

Spiritual Movements in Political Arenas: The Rise of New Religious Movements in Vietnam and Japan. The Case of Caodaism and Soka Gakkai (1945-1954)

Phạm Hoàng Anh Tuấn

University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Abstract

The period following World War II was turbulent for many societies worldwide, particularly with reference to the link between ideology and spirituality. Many East Asian societies witnessed the rise of numerous spiritual movements and new religious organizations. Despite multiple challenges, especially political ones, many of these new religious organizations continue to exist to this day. This article explores and compares the emergence, transformation, and adaptation of two new religious organizations: Caodaism (specifically the Tây Ninh Holy See branch) in Vietnam and Soka Gakkai in Japan, viewed against the socio-political context of the immediate post-World War II era. Using this approach, the study will elucidate the political activities of these organizations during a time of significant upheaval. While many scholarly studies focus on Caodaism and Soka Gakkai separately, this article leverages those findings, using a comparative approach, to analyse how these new religious organizations adapted to and influenced their countries' political landscapes. It aims to provide a foundation for understanding the impact of spiritual elements on the political history and activities of Vietnam and Japan in the mid-twentieth century, which could be a valuable scholarly resource for studying other new religious movements (especially in East Asia) during this period.¹

Keywords

Vietnam; Caodaism; Japan; Soka Gakkai; New Religion; Politics.

Caodaism in Vietnam

Caodaism is an indigenous religious organization in Vietnam, officially established in 1926, primarily by the scholarly and official class of the Indochinese colony of Cochinchina during the French colonial period. It attracted a large number of followers from the peasantry and the working classes. The establishment and early development of Caodaism in the mid-twentieth century saw numerous challenges closely tied to political issues, particularly the struggle for national liberation. The founding leaders of Caodaism correctly

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identified the direction and methods for expanding their religion, as noted by Nguyễn Thanh Xuân; “The Cao Dai leaders determined that if they received widespread support from the public in the Southern region, especially in areas like Saigon and Chợ Lớn... Therefore, they focused their missionary efforts and investments in these areas” (Nguyễn Thanh Xuân, 2012, p. 97). Consequently, Caodaism developed rapidly and with tremendous zeal. Many scholars record the scale of this early development. Sergei Blagov provides estimated figures: in 1926, he suggests there were about 50,000 Cao Dai followers with thirty-one distinct places of worship. This soon increased to approximately 150,000 members in 1928 and 350,000 in 1931 (Blagov, 1999, p. 4).

Caodaism coalesced in a highly tumultuous context and developed rapidly. This inevitably led to internal conflicts and disputes. According to Nguyễn Thanh Xuân, 1934 was the year that marked the deepest organizational crisis in Caodaism's history (Nguyễn Thanh Xuân, 2003, p. 48). The organization was profoundly divided due to internal disagreements among its leaders, particularly between Nguyễn Ngọc Tường and Lê Bá Trang who faced off against Lê Văn Trung and Phạm Công Tắc. This struggle for leadership amongst prominent Caodaists resulted in Tường and Trang retreating to Bến Tre and forming the Ban Chính Đạo branch of Caodaism. Subsequent splits led to twelve distinct branches of Caodaism by 1945 (Jammes, 2016, p. 248)). For reasons of space, this article will focus on the original organization which settled in Tây Ninh province (which is often called the “Tây Ninh Branch”). It was led by Phạm Công Tắc and, during this his exile, Trần Quang Vinh.

In Vietnam, post-1975 research on Caodaism has often only briefly mentioned an important historical phase in the development of the Tây Ninh branch. This was its deep connection with Japan from the period of Japanese Imperial occupation of the French colony from 1941 onwards. This Japanese focus extended some years after the war's end in 1945. Scholars can do more to examine this phase in detail. What is crucial in this period for the latter development of Caodaist militarism, is the Tây Ninh branch's cooperation with the Japanese *Kempeitai* or military police. This was driven by aspirations of national restoration under Japanese patronage and through the aegis of Prince Cường Để (1882-1951), a pretender to the Vietnamese throne and an ardent nationalist. Under the Japanese, a Caodaist army was formed. After 1945 this military arm of the religion forced the returning French colonists to recognize a certain amount of autonomy to those areas dominated by the Tây Ninh branch. This led to increasing collaboration with the French during their final years of colonial control of the nation (1946-1954).

In its early days, Caodaism faced significant criticism from prominent intellectuals. Nguyễn An Ninh, a Western-educated commentator, harshly remarked: “Only extreme ignorance could combine Catholicism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Spiritism into one... Caodaism encompasses the worst aspects of these religions” (Nguyễn An Ninh, 1932, p. 213). Post-independence studies even accused Caodaism of collaborating with the French from the start: “Why would the French allow the establishment of nationalist, democratic organizations during the tumultuous years of 1925-1926? ... these Thầy giảng cơ [spiritualist mediums] are too eager to praise the popular Franco-Vietnamese solidarity policy” (Trần Văn Giàu, 2020, pp. 186, 187). However, there are reasons to think that this view might be inaccurate. The French administration may have initially tolerated the early spiritual activities of Caodaism due to its cultural similarities with Western spiritism and French Masonry, but it is difficult to claim that the French actively supported or facilitated its establishment and aided its growth. Immediately after Caodaism was founded, the French administration exhibited suspicion and strict control, eventually leading to prohibition: “banning the opening or construction of new temples as any permissions equated to official recognition of the sect” (Son Nam, 1971, p. 20). This strict stance became more evident as nationalist movements gained momentum across Vietnam. The French feared that Caodaism might evolve into an anti-French political organization (similar to the anti-Qing Dynasty Triad societies at work in China). Indeed from 1940, French colonial policies of tolerance towards Tây Ninh radically changed. This resulted in severe repressive measures against

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Caodaism, such as the closing of temples, the breaking up of ceremonies, and the imprisoning or threatened interrogation of its clergy.

Collaboration with the Japanese

It has been speculated that this new policy of intolerance was a result of the Vichy French assuming control of Indochina after the Nazi invasion of France (Hartney 2024, p. 18-19). In 1940, French authorities arrested and exiled the Hộ Pháp (Caodai Pope) Phạm Công Tắc to Madagascar, sparking a wave of fierce opposition from Caodaists. Many devoted adherents organized protests, all of which were suppressed by the French. Like many nationalist and freedom groups, the Tây Ninh Caodaist supported Japan's Pan-Asianism policy and anticipated liberation from French domination with Japan's assistance (this attitude stems from moves by nationalists in the early part of the twentieth century to develop a “Đông Du” or “Look to the East” movement for ways to promote Vietnamese independence [Hartney 2024, p. 18-19]). The relationship between Tây Ninh Caodaists and the Japanese was marked by the meeting of high-ranking Caodaist official Trần Quang Vinh with Japanese *Kenpeitai* officers Kimura and Mochizuki on 1 December 1942. By 1943, the relationship had solidified (Trần Mỹ Vân, 1996, p. 185). From Vinh's perspective, this cooperation was mutually beneficial, involving an exchange of information for military aid from Japan to resist the French and with the Japanese benefitting from Caodaist workers for their war effort. With Japanese military cooperation, the Tây Ninh Holy See received protection from civil authorities (i.e., the Vichy French) and became a haven for nationalistic and patriotic activists.

Key figures in this collaboration included Trần Quang Vinh, who maintained the connection between Caodai and the Japanese. The relationship was made more potent because Prince Cường Đê (in whom the Caodaists has vested much hope for national change) was in exile in Japan during the 1940s. As World War II continued, he became the symbolic leader of the independence movement, especially after the legitimate (i.e., French-approved) emperor Bao Dai had moved to Hanoi and there abdicated his throne in favour of Ho Chi Minh. The Japanese/Caodaist partnership led to broad-based coup in March 1945. Under Trần Quang Vinh's direction, Caodai troops attacked French administrative offices in various provinces, and many colonists were killed. Besides participating directly in the coup, Caodai soldiers provided an intelligence network to support the Japanese. The coup swiftly concluded with a victory for the Caodai-Japanese alliance, resulting in the replacement of provincial governors. This victory allowed previously closed Caodaist temples to reopen. But the results of this resurgence would be terminated at the war's end when the French returned.

Under the leadership of Trần Quang Vinh, Caodai and its military received significant benefits from the Japanese. However, “the trust of the Caodaists in Japan has often been seen as blind and illusory, as the Caodaists clung to the hopes for an eventual liberation and the return of Cường Đê” (Trần Mỹ Vân, 1996, p. 191). Indeed, even with Japan's defeat and surrender in World War II, the promise of Cường Đê's return remained unfulfilled. Subsequently, with the French reoccupation of Indochina, Caodaism in general, and the Tây Ninh branch in particular, faced hostility from various sides, including the French – who still had the leader Phạm Công Tắc in captivity and in exile.

Collaboration with the French

October 1945 marked a dark period for Caodaism. The French army carried out brutal and repressive actions, attacking Caodaist temples in Saigon and arresting and interrogating numerous clergy members. Many followers fled to other provinces or even into the jungle. The French continued to raid Caodaist facilities, eventually capturing almost all of the high-ranking officials of the Tây Ninh branch, including Trần Quang Vinh. This was complete by 5 August 1946. Facing the collapse of the organization, Vinh chose to ally with the French to secure the freedom of the “Chi Đội” (Vệ Quốc Đoàn armed forces of the Tây Ninh Caodai

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branch), and other clergy. Consequently, the Caodaist army of the Tây Ninh branch, which had been founded to fight against the French in the cause of national liberation, now became an indirect instrument of French colonial control in the decade following the war.

This was confirmed when on 23 August 1946 Phạm Công Tắc returned to Vietnam from exile in Madagascar. He immediately called on his followers to cooperate with the French. After the establishment in Hanoi of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (Việt Nam Dân chủ Cộng hòa or DRV), tensions between factions and the new government escalated, leading to severe conflicts. As a result, the DRV implemented policies to suppress and dissolve these organizations, including the Tây Ninh Caodai branch led by Phạm Công Tắc. This culminated in a fierce attack on the religion by DRV forces in September 1946. This came after many failed attempts to come to an agreement through negotiation (Guillemot, 2010, p. 238). This action is believed to have been driven by radical factions within the Việt Minh, as the broader context of the time suggests that while the Việt Minh leadership (DRV), was focused on consolidating power and eliminating threats, many violent actions were executed by local commanders and radical elements within the movements. Facing these assaults, the leaders of the Tây Ninh Caodai faction were eager to receive aid from the French.

The collaboration between the French and the Tây Ninh Caodai faction began in 1946 with several notable actions: these included appointing Caodai followers like Lê Văn Hoạch and Nguyễn Văn Tâm to important positions in the colonial government, and recruiting local soldiers, including Caodai troops, into the French army. It was only when the DRV launched a resistance campaign against the French that the French, despite maintaining a cautious attitude towards Caodaism, approved the rearmament request from high-ranking officials of the Tây Ninh Holy See. The Fray Accord, signed on 8 January 1947 (Jammes 2016, p. 260), marked an official alliance between the French army and the Caodai group led by Phạm Công Tắc. Although the official Caodai representative was Trần Quang Vinh, Phạm Công Tắc signed in his absence (Trần Văn Rạng, 1975, p. 103). However, the signing of the accord did not mean that the French completely trusted the Caodaists. This wariness was made evident in several clauses, including the first which read: “the Caodai shall establish an army and will disband it when deemed unnecessary” (Trần Văn Rạng, 1975, p. 103, quoting the 1947 accord).

Despite French oversight, the Caodai army's numbers significantly increased after the 1947 accord from 1,970 soldiers in 1947 to 65,000 by 1954 (Jammes, 2016, pp. 262-263). This growth can be attributed to strategic adjustments by the French, such as urging the Caodaist army to intensify its engagements. According to an interview with former commander Nguyễn Văn Thành, the only significant confrontation with the Việt Minh that penetrated the inner sanctum of the Tây Ninh Holy See occurred at the end of January 1947. On other occasions, Caodai troops were able to intercept attacks outside the inner area of control. At times, however, the Caodai command also staged battles so that they could justify their requests for more weapons from the French (Trần Văn Rạng, 1975, p. 110).

Another important reason for the dramatic increase in military numbers was the autonomous actions of Caodai army leaders. Despite having a fixed and continuous French mission to monitor the Caodai army, complete control over their policies and activities, including troop numbers, was impossible. One notable example of this autonomy was the case of Trình Minh Thế, a prominent member of the Tây Ninh Cao Dai branch who initially cooperated with Japan and the French coup in 1945. However, after the faction's leadership decided to align with the French, Thế gradually became a dissident, officially declaring his secession in January 1948, though he briefly returned to Tây Ninh two days later (Blagov, 2001, p. 48). The French relied on reports from Caodai leaders, that could differ from actual actions, conflicts, and numbers involved (Trần Văn Rạng, 1975, p. 106). In 1947, when former emperor Bảo Đại was enticed by the French to become the head of state for a government named by the French the *État du Việt Nam* (established 1949), Phạm Công Tắc publicly announced his support for Bảo Đại. The Caodai faction led by Phạm Công Tắc,

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along with other religious and political groups including Hòa Hảo, the Việt Nam Cách mệnh Đồng minh Hội, Đại Việt Quốc dân đảng, and Việt Nam Quốc dân Đảng, formed the United National Front, supporting Bảo Đại as their representative to negotiate with the French for Vietnam's independence.

Trần Quang Vinh held the position of General Commander of the Caodai army until about 1950, after which the role was transferred to General Nguyễn Văn Thành. During Thành's tenure, local troops often did not report their numbers directly to the French but only to the Caodai Command, such as at the Thanh Bình post in Mỹ Tho. To assert control and prevent this, the French surrounded and attacked the Thanh Bình post, resulting in many casualties, including local commander Vệ úy Phan Hồng Ngự. The French then tried to bribe General Nguyễn Văn Thành to gain stricter control over the Caodai army. After Thành, Major General Nguyễn Thành Phương became the next General Commander of the Caodai army (1950-1953). This transition was facilitated by the French, leading Phạm Công Tắc to concede and appoint Phương. Previously, in a vote by thirty-nine Caodai dignitaries, Lê Văn Tất had won the position, indicating a conflict between the laity and the Caodai military. Initially, Phạm Công Tắc wanted Caodaism to mediate between the French and the Việt Minh, but the internal power struggles within the Caodai military obscured this role. In an official announcement (Holy Order 149 in 1949), Phạm Công Tắc expressed his intention to disarm and remain neutral. By 1952, he took further steps to separate Caodaism from the military, such as relocating the Caodai army away from the Tây Ninh Holy See (Trần Văn Rạng, 1975, p. 119).

In early 1954, as the French faced calamity at Điện Biên Phủ, resulting in their eventual defeat and decision to retreat from Indochina, Bảo Đại repeatedly invited Ngô Đình Diệm to Saigon to form a government. At this time, Phạm Công Tắc, was involved in political activities in Paris, but was also contacted by Bảo Đại who urged him to support Ngô Đình Diệm. This marked the beginning of a new phase in the relationships between Caodaism and the Catholic Christian Ngô Đình Diệm – who would go on to become the first president of the Republic of South Vietnam in 1955 and develop extensive connections with the United States which would, in turn, lead to the American War.

In summary, after Japan's surrender in World War II and the harsh repression by the French, the Caodaist group led by Phạm Công Tắc transitioned from collaborating with Japan to cooperating with the French. Many scholars and intellectuals of the time, and in later eras, severely criticized Phạm Công Tắc's leadership, and often equated all Caodai organizations as opportunistic traitors to the cause of national independence. However, from the perspective of the religion's survival and development, this transition can be seen as a pragmatic and necessary response to the complex political landscape of the time.

Soka Gakkai in Japan

After its defeat in World War II, Japan experienced multiple significant upheavals that shook not only its economy and society, but also its ideological foundations. With the reforms introduced by the occupying Allied forces, numerous policies were implemented, including the thorough separation of religion and politics and the protection of religious freedom. Significantly Shinto ceased to be a state cult and was relegated to a local shrine movement, and in early 1946 Emperor Hirohito renounced his divinity on national radio (Otomo 2011). These changes provided an opportunity for new religions to revive, develop, and even proliferate, now that they had emerged from the shadow of Meiji-inspired hyper-nationalism and government repression of alternative religious groups was relaxed. Among these, Soka Gakkai stood out as the most prominent and successful of the emerging movements. Soka Gakkai is a new religion based on the Lotus Sutra of Nichiren Buddhism. It is a large sect with followers and facilities in 192 countries. Currently, in Japan alone, it boasts 8.27 million households as members, while internationally, it counts 2.8 million households.

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Soka Gakkai at its inception was under the leadership of its first president, Makiguchi Tsunesaburo (牧口常三郎) (1871-1944). At this period it was more focused on educational reform than religion. Makiguchi, a former teacher, sought to transform Japan's educational system. However, due to his fervent belief in Nichiren Buddhism, the organization gradually leaned towards religious activities, which became evident in its missionary work, and in the large amount of religious writings among its publications. This shift made Soka Gakkai a target of Japan's wartime religious policies. Under the “Shukyo Tosei Seisaku” (宗教統制政策: Religious Control Policy), which aimed to unify religious sects, the Nichiren Shoshu and Nichiren Shu sects were forced to merge. Soka Gakkai, which adhered to Nichiren Shoshu teachings, vehemently opposed this merger.

As the war progressed, the government required temples and households to display the Shinto talisman “Jingu Taima” (神宮大麻) distributed by the nationalist, pro-Imperial Ise Grand Shrine. Nichiren Shoshu and Soka Gakkai reacted differently to this mandate. While Nichiren Shoshu complied by keeping the talisman in its main temple, Soka Gakkai refused. Noah Brannen explains that Makiguchi wanted to adhere to Nichiren Daishonin’s teaching that new adherents should discard all objects from other religions through a ceremony called “Hobobarai” (謗法払い) (Brannen 12964). However, Shimada Hiromi offers another explanation, suggesting that Makiguchi did not entirely reject the “morality of Shinto worship” which the government claimed was a national practice and not a religion. During the fifth conference of the organization, Makiguchi clarified his view that visiting and worshipping at the Yasukuni Shrine was not for personal gain but to express gratitude to the Emperor. Additionally, Makiguchi emphasized respect for the goddess Amaterasu (the divine founder of the Japanese dynasty) and acknowledged the divinity of Emperor Showa. Makiguchi's refusal to accept the Jingu Taima talisman was to affirm his loyalty to the Emperor, as accepting the talisman would imply worshipping two supreme deities, thus compromising his loyalty. He did not consider rejecting and burning the talisman to be an act of disrespect towards the imperial family (Shimada 2004, p. 26). Shimada’s interpretation highlights that Makiguchi did not reject the Emperor’s divinity in its cultural sense. On the contrary, he acknowledged the Emperor’s divine role as a symbol of the Japanese state and a figure worthy of respect and gratitude. This is evident from his participation in worship at the Yasukuni Shrine, which he viewed as an expression of gratitude rather than personal religious devotion. By refusing the talisman, Makiguchi was not denying the Emperor’s divinity but was instead reaffirming his loyalty. Accepting the talisman would, in his view, imply divided allegiance between the Emperor and another deity. Regardless of his intentions, he was nevertheless perceived as a defiant, anti-government figure, warranting his detention.

In 1942, the government also scrutinized Soka Gakkai for publishing the magazine *Kachi Sozo* (価値創造: “Value Creation”), which was discontinued after its ninth issue as it was deemed by government authorities to contain inappropriate content. Makiguchi and his student Toda, along with other members, were arrested and prosecuted in July 1943 under Article 7 of the peace preservation law, convicted of establishing an organization with the purpose of disseminating disrespectful ideas towards the imperial family and Shinto shrines. Makiguchi was imprisoned in cell number 4 on the second floor of Sugamo Prison in Tokyo. While other members were gradually released, only Makiguchi, Toda, and another official remained incarcerated. The harsh prison conditions and the news of his only surviving son’s death in China due to an infectious disease during the war weakened Makiguchi, leading to his death in 1944 at the age of seventy-three.

For typical religious organizations, the death of a leader, especially due to oppression, often becomes a catalyst for the organization's growth, with the leader being martyred and his memory sanctified. However, this phenomenon did not occur after Makiguchi's death. His passing was not sacralised; he died as an ordinary leader. Therefore, his death did not serve as a springboard for any significant breakthrough in Soka

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Gakkai's development. During the period when key figures were detained, Soka Gakkai, then known as Soka Kyoiku Gakkai, was temporarily dissolved. We can see then that during Makiguchi's tenure as president, Soka Gakkai faced severe repression from Japan's militarist government, similar to other new religious movements that opposed the state Shinto ideology and challenged the divine status of the Emperor.

Active Engagements in Politics

Soka Gakkai's significant political involvement began under the leadership of President Toda Josei (戸田城聖). After being imprisoned for two years on charges of insulting the Imperial family, Toda was released in March 1945. Despite his deteriorating health and failing spirit due to harsh the prison conditions he had suffered, he immediately embarked on rebuilding Soka Gakkai, which, at this time, had been effectively disbanded (Brannan 1964).

Toda had already shown political ambition before officially becoming Soka Gakkai's President. In March 1950, he published an article in the organization's magazine, *Daibyaku Renge* ("Great White Lotus"), discussing the relationship between the rule of law and Buddhist law (Wang, 2005). This article can be seen as laying the theoretical groundwork for the organization's forthcoming political engagement. In it, Toda argued that a legitimate government should create a realm where citizens can live and work in peace, criticizing Japan's militaristic government, which prioritized war over the lives and well-being of its people. Toda maintained that political leaders, whether or not they adhered to Buddhist principles, should use state power to realize Buddhist teachings. He emphasized that the rule of law and Buddhist law should unite, and that politics and individual happiness should be inseparable. In 1954, the organization's newspaper, *Seikyo Shinbun*, published an article titled "Until the Establishment of a National Ordination Platform" (Shimada 2021, p. 196). This article clearly outlined Soka Gakkai's goal: to secure more than half of the votes in the lower chamber of parliament. This would then enable the establishment of a national platform for propagating the teachings of the organization. In the same year, Soka Gakkai established a cultural department, which deeply engaged in the organization's political efforts.

By 1956, under Toda's leadership, Soka Gakkai successfully nominated six candidates in the upper house elections, with three winning seats—two in the national elections and one in the local Osaka elections. This success was attributed to the strategic coordination between Toda, a former businessman, and a young, energetic member named Ikeda, who would later become a highly influential figure in the organization. Toda devised the electoral strategies, while Ikeda, on the front lines, campaigned in areas where the organization's candidates had fewer votes. Ikeda mobilized members to vote and encouraged them to persuade their relatives, friends, and business partners to vote as well. To prevent members from abstaining from the voting process, Ikeda cleverly linked voting to Toda's philosophy of uniting the rule of law and Buddhist law, making voting a responsibility for followers to achieve personal happiness (Dawson 2011). This strategy raised suspicions that Soka Gakkai wanted to place members in parliament to nationalize Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism, but Toda quickly dismissed these allegations as "conspiracy theories."

Soka Gakkai's election campaigns were often intense. According to the *Asahi* newspaper on 26 October 1954, the organization, working under the guise of religious missionary work, engaged in actions that were considered extreme. Many members believed that all religions and sects other than Nichiren Shoshu were heretical. There were instances, then, where members disrupted Christian churches and even destroyed the altars and icons of other religions, calling it Hobobarai (purging blasphemy). This extremism was evident in their election campaigns, where some members aggressively demanded households vote for their candidates, leading to arrests. For example, in Kanagawa, police searches revealed that members would enter homes, present a paper with the candidate's name (referred to as "Orei" or "offering"), and insist that it be "offered to the gods," threatening illness for non-compliance (*Asahi*, 25 June 1956). In response to these arrests, Soka Gakkai's press accused the police of obstructing their campaign, and some members even protested at police

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stations. It is clear that Soka Gakkai members conducted campaigns without regard for the electoral law. They used coercive tactics similar to their missionary methods. Similar violations occurred in local elections, leading to the arrest of key members including Koizumi and Ikeda for electoral fraud, though both were eventually acquitted. However, about twenty other members were convicted and received administrative fines or short-term imprisonment.

Despite the controversial methods, Soka Gakkai succeeded in winning three seats in the upper house, marking its political debut. Following the election, due to disagreements with Soka Gakkai's methods, the Japan Coal Miners' Union, one of the largest and most influential labor unions in Japan during this period, took steps to distance itself from the organization and this included expelling Soka Gakkai members from positions within the union or excluding them from participating in certain union activities. Additionally, many left-wing parties began to watch Soka Gakkai with increased vigilance, and several political parties criticized and condemned the organization. Despite the criticism, Soka Gakkai had become a political force to be reckoned with. In March 1958, during the completion ceremony of the Taisei Temple's Great Buddha Hall, numerous political figures attended, including Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi, Minister of Education Matsunaga Tou, and Tokyo Governor Yasui Seiichiro. With these successes, President Toda not only restored Soka Gakkai but also expanded its scale and activities, establishing it as a powerful entity with considerable political influence. Even after Toda died in 1958, Soka Gakkai continued its robust political engagement under his successor (Dawson 2001).

The Rise of Caodaism and Soka Gakkai

Despite being established and developing in distinct economic, political, and social environments, the two organizations in different countries—Caodaism in Vietnam and Soka Gakkai in Japan—share some interesting similarities. After 1945, Vietnam continued to face numerous wars for national independence and unification, while Japan, having surrendered in World War II, began the reconstruction of the nation. Nevertheless, both Caodaism and Soka Gakkai demonstrated high levels of adaptability and resilience, even developing theological doctrines that could serve as a foundation for a national religion.

Adaptability and Resilience

Caodaism, (specifically the Tây Ninh branch led by Phạm Công Tắc), and Soka Gakkai exhibited remarkable adaptability in response to the complex political contexts of their times. The Tây Ninh Caodai branch demonstrated strategic flexibility by aligning with different powers, including the Japanese army and later the French during their reoccupation of Vietnam. The leaders' attitudes towards these alliances differed: with the Japanese, they proactively sought collaboration in hopes of liberation from French rule, establishing a relationship with the Japanese army in 1942. In contrast, their cooperation with the French can be seen as a pragmatic compromise, with Trần Quang Vinh choosing to work with the French in exchange for the freedom of Caodaist clergy and soldiers. This practical approach was essential for the organization's survival, as a Caodaist follower once said: "As long as Cao Dai religion exists, we win." (Trần Mỹ Vân, 1996, p. 192). Internally, both movements faced significant challenges. Caodaism had to address factionalism and maintain cohesion among its followers, especially after deciding to collaborate with the French, which led to accusations of opportunism. Despite these internal and external alliances, such pragmatic decisions were crucial for the movement's survival in an unstable political environment. On the other hand, Soka Gakkai emerged from wartime repression in Japan to become a socio-political force under the leadership of Josei Toda and later Daisaku Ikeda. Toda's release from prison in 1945 marked a new beginning (Brannen 1964). Under Toda, Soka Gakkai focused on revitalization, expanding its membership, and engaging in politics to influence national policies and promote its values in a newly democratized Japan, ensuring its survival.

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Toda's vision for Soka Gakkai went beyond mere survival; it was about transforming society through the application of Buddhist principles. His strategy involved not only expanding the organization's membership but also fostering a sense of responsibility among members to participate in the political process. This approach was evident in the organization's electoral strategies and the establishment of its own media outlet, *Seikyo Shinbun*, which served as a platform to disseminate its values and political objectives (Dawson 2001).

Both movements strategically sought external support to strengthen their positions. From 1945 to 1954, after shifting alliances from the Japanese to the French, the Tây Ninh branch of Caodaism received, or rather actively sought, military and resource support from the French, formalized through the 1947 Fray Agreement. This alliance significantly bolstered Caodaism's military presence, growing from 1,970 soldiers in 1947 to 65,000 in 1954. In return, the French gained local allies against the rising influence of the Việt Minh. The relationship between Caodaism and the French was complex and often seen as a marriage of convenience. For the French, aligning with the Tây Ninh branch provided a local force to counter the Việt Minh. For the Caodaists, this alliance was a means of survival and maintaining their influence in a rapidly changing political landscape. This period saw significant military and organizational growth for Caodaism, but it also brought about a legacy of controversy and criticism regarding their political alliances. In Soka Gakkai's case, while clear external alliances were not evident during this period, the organization's political strategies involved forming alliances with political entities. In 1954, Soka Gakkai registered its media outlet, *Seikyo Shinbun*, and outlined its political goals, including establishing a national platform to propagate its teachings. The success of Soka Gakkai's candidates in the 1956 upper house elections, where three out of six candidates won seats, demonstrated their effectiveness in mobilizing support and leveraging political structures to advance their agenda. Furthermore, during this period, Toda was believed to have had a good relationship with Kishi Nobusuke, who became Japan's Prime Minister in 1957. For instance, Shintaro Abe, representing Kishi, attended a Soka Gakkai event at the Taiseki Temple inauguration, indicating the budding relationships with external powers that would grow more complex over time (Toda, 1961, pp. 373-378). Soka Gakkai's political strategy was deeply intertwined with its religious mission. Toda's emphasis on the unity of Buddhist law and national governance created a framework within which the organization could justify its political activities as an extension of its religious mission. This approach not only legitimized their political involvement but also motivated members to actively participate in the political process as a means of fulfilling their spiritual duties.

Both the Tây Ninh Caodaist branch and Soka Gakkai demonstrated their ability to adapt to political changes, leverage external support to address internal challenges, and maintain and develop their organizations. Their experiences highlight the resilience and strategic acumen needed to navigate complex political landscapes and sustain cohesion within their movements. They exemplify how new religious movements can strategically align with external forces and effectively adapt to changing political environments to ensure their survival and influence in post-war Vietnam and Japan.

The Foundation for the Dream of a National Religion

Research by Jérémy Jammes has identified four characteristics in the identity that Caodaist leaders aimed to establish: “the mediumistic relationship to the dead (the number of which necessarily increases on battlefields); the utopian project of establishing a national religion; bio-governance in war (managing the military as well as dealing with the wounded and the bodies of the deceased, maintaining facilities to care for the unemployed and the displaced); and a neo-monarchist millenarianism” (Jammes, 2016, p. 250). In fact, the theological foundation of Caodaism includes documents that support the belief in a single national religion.

Although Caodaism is divided into many branches, its teachings and history are unified across these branches. The dream of a national religion is evident from the early days of its establishment. This is reflected

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in the “Thánh ngôn hiệp tuyên,” which records the teachings of Đức Chí Tôn (or “The Supreme Being”). On Saturday, September 18, 1926, Đức Chí Tôn proclaimed: “My children, I have established the Holy See, a communal house for you. I have also unified the Three Teachings to create the New Law. On the day of the full moon in October, there will be a grand assembly of the Three Teachings at the Holy See ... From now on, in Vietnam, there is only one true religion that I have come to establish for you, called the national religion, understand?” (Nguyễn Văn Hồng, 2000, sermon 34, ebook). Through this teaching, the founders of Caodaism also affirmed: “Now Cao Đài The Supreme Being has descended, using the mystical spirit pen to establish the True Religion in the South, uniting the Three Teachings into one, intending to gather humanity into one family... Using the Vietnamese language as the primary script to establish the religion. From now on, in Vietnam, there is only one true religion, the religion of the Jade Emperor, called Cao Đài, established as the national religion.” (Phổ cáo chúng sanh, 1926, p. 11). Thus, the concept of a national religion loomed large in the thoughts of the founders. From its inception, Caodaism aimed to reconcile and unify the religious philosophies of East and West. This syncretic theology was viewed by the early leaders, especially those from the Tây Ninh branch, as a means to promote global harmony and peace, positioning Caodaism as a potential unifying force for the Vietnamese people. These leaders saw the religious movement not just as a spiritual endeavor but also as a political project that could lead to the establishment of a national religion: “The religion of Vietnam, established on Vietnamese soil, will spread from here to the world. The Vietnamese people are chosen by the Supreme Being, hence receiving more favor than other nations... Through this National Religion, the Vietnamese people will later become the spiritual leaders of humanity” (Nguyễn Văn Hồng, 2000, footnote to sermon 34, ebook).

On the other hand, Soka Gakkai, as previously mentioned, under President Toda Josei’s leadership, was rebuilt, post-war, with a strong emphasis on developing the theoretical foundation for the organization’s activities. One notable concept is the “National Ordination Platform” (国立戒壇: Kokuritsu Kaidan). In 1954, in his work *Ōbutsu Myogo* (王仏冥合論: “The theory of the union of the king and the Buddha”), Toda noted this concept. He identified three critical tasks in Buddhism: 1) **Propagation Assignment** (弘宣付嘱: **Gusen Fuzoku**) Wise and holy individuals spread Shakyamuni Buddha’s teachings according to the time and people’s capacities; 2) **Transmission Assignment** (伝持付嘱: **Denji Fuzoku**) Wise and holy individuals transmit and maintain the Buddha’s teachings across generations; 3) **Protection Assignment** (守護付嘱: **Shugo Fuzoku**): Kings and lay supporters protect the Buddha’s teachings, ensuring their longevity. To fulfill these tasks, the ultimate goal was to establish a national ordination platform to ensure the perpetuation of Buddhist teachings. Toda identified the current location of Taiseki Temple, near Mount Fuji, as an ideal site for this platform due to its “pure and expansive” nature (Toda, 1960, pp. 215-216).

Although Toda did not elaborate on the definition of a ‘national ordination platform’ in the ‘*Ōbutsu Myogo*,’ the term is often associated with Tanaka Chigaku. Tanaka believed this ordination platform to be “the sacred place that will gather the devotion of all people of the world” and “after the merger of Buddhism and government, the ordination platform must be erected. This will concretise the manifestation of the precepts referred to in “The Three Great Secret Dharmas” quoted above. It means actually building the ordination platform where the people of all three countries and the entire world will perform repentance and eradicate their sins.” (Stone 2019, pp. 643). Tanaka envisioned establishing Nichiren Buddhism as a national religion through imperial decree and parliamentary action, placing the ordination platform at Miho in Shizuoka Prefecture. Thus, while Toda did not explicitly advocate for a national religion as the directors of Caodaism did, the concept of a “national ordination platform” implies that Soka Gakkai aimed to manifest as the national religion in Japan. However, with Japan’s post-war constitution enforcing the separation of religion and state, and Soka Gakkai’s rapid growth attracting scrutiny from journalists and other organizations, the leaders had to tactfully distance the organization’s concept of a national ordination platform from Tanaka’s original definition.

Conclusion

The post-World War II era was a transformative period for new religious movements in Vietnam and Japan, as illustrated by the cases of Caodaism and Soka Gakkai. Both movements demonstrated remarkable adaptability and resilience in the face of complex political landscapes, leveraging strategic alliances and practical compromises to ensure their survival and growth. Tây Ninh Holy See branch of Caodaism faced significant challenges, including internal factionalism and external repression, yet managed to navigate these difficulties through strategic alignments with powerful entities such as the Japanese military and later the French colonial authorities. This pragmatic approach, while controversial, was essential for maintaining the movement's influence and ensuring its followers' safety. The dream of establishing a national religion remained a central tenet of Caodaism, reflecting its leaders' vision of unifying diverse religious philosophies to promote national and global harmony.

Soka Gakkai emerged from wartime repression in Japan to become a formidable socio-political force. Under the leadership of Josei Toda and later Daisaku Ikeda, Soka Gakkai revitalized its membership and actively engaged in politics, advocating for policies aligned with its values. The organization's success in electoral politics, despite facing criticism and scrutiny, underscored its ability to mobilize support and influence national policies. Soka Gakkai's vision of a “National Ordination Platform” indicated its aspirations for a significant role in Japan's spiritual and political spheres. Both Caodaism and Soka Gakkai exemplify the dynamic interplay between religion and politics in mid-20th century East Asia. Their experiences highlight the capacity of new religious movements to adapt, survive, and even thrive amidst political turmoil. The strategic acumen demonstrated by their leaders, coupled with their ability to inspire and mobilize followers, ensured their continued relevance and influence. As these movements continue to evolve, their historical trajectories offer valuable insights into the potential of spiritual organizations to shape and be shaped by the political arenas they inhabit.

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