

Sikh and CaoDai Understandings of Interfaith Harmony: Promoting a Culture of Peace and Understanding



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Original Articles

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Abstract

The concept of interfaith harmony is one of the key issues for discussion in this contemporary world. It has multifaceted implications that range from pedagogical realms to global policy making. Here we focus on the basic concepts of interfaith harmony from Sikh and Cao Dai perspectives in order to address their viewpoints in regard to promoting culture of Peace and Understanding. Although these religions are new as compared to the existing living religions of the world, they found their new identity in the history of world religions for their unique concepts of interfaith harmony. In this article, the concept of interfaith harmony has been analyzed from two perspectives such as theological and socio-historical. For a systematic understanding of the subject matter, it has been categorized into three subpoints; unity of God, unity of religions and unity of humanity. Methodologically, the qualitative methodological framework of the proposed research is descriptive in nature. Thus, the present research has been primarily conducted by using secondary sources, although the crucial information is collected from primary sources such as the sacred texts of Sikhism and Caodaism. Since this study is done considering the social, political and religious contexts of India and Vietnam, it can contribute to the understanding of the nature of interfaith harmony in South and South-East Asia.

Keywords: Interfaith Harmony; Interreligious Harmony Sikhism; Caodaism; India; Vietnam; Unity; Pluralism; Unity of Religion; Unity of Humanity

Introduction

The academic study of religions is one of the most important additions to the continuous growth of human consciousness. The study of religions from different perspectives and disciplines has shifted religion from theological and personal boundaries and posited it as a multi-dimensional, life-oriented factor. Religions have now become an important part of the cognitive realm that deals with almost everything connected to human life (Giddens 2006). From socio-historical and psychological perspectives, religion has proven itself an integral part of individual and collective human life, which is natural to individuals, and it is not a fixed or finished function but a changing and growing one (Coe 1904). In the field of the study of religions, the concept of interfaith harmony is gaining impetus at the global policy level, and it has been considered as one of the most influential factors to meet the challenges of intolerance, extremism, and religious militancy of the world (Wang 2013). This research work lays out the concept of interfaith harmony in Sikhism and Caodaism following the methodology of the comparative study of religion.

Sikhism and Caodaism are comparatively new religions in the world. Sikhism originated around 1500 CE with the teachings of its founder Guru Nanak in India (Chatterji 1971). Caodaism emerged in the early twentieth century in South Vietnam with Ngo Minh Chieu's (1878–1932) acceptance of the religion of God, Duc Cao Dai (Alam 2010). Despite almost all the religions of the world including the notion of harmony in their doctrines, Caodaism and Sikhism are unique in that sense that they have had added the notion of “interfaith harmony” as a core belief and acknowledge the existence of the truths in almost all religions and call for a unity based on harmony. Sikhism and Caodaism both posited the need for harmonious existence in an unprecedented manner (Islam and Islam 2016; Alam 2010; Farid 2010). This research work, therefore, analyzes and explains interfaith harmony from the perspectives of unity of God, unity of humanity, unity of religion, and provides examples of freedom of religions in Sikhism and Caodaism.

Research Methodology

To conduct this research work, the researchers have adopted a qualitative methodology appropriate to the subject matter. Following the qualitative method, the researchers have utilized secondary sources as a method of data collection. It is important to mention that, since this research work mostly depends on secondary sources, the collected data and sources have been used after analyses, assessments, rechecks, cross-checks, and careful evaluation to avoid any errors.

Conceptual Framework

Sikhism

The Sikh religion originated at the end of the fifteenth century in the area of north-west India and Pakistan, called the Punjab. Both Hinduism and Islam were the predominant religions in this area. Popularly it is said that Sikhism was born out of a union between Hinduism and Islam. It is said that a number of people were asking themselves whether a ritual or formal way of life would bring them near to God, and Sikhism offered them an alternative way of life (Davies 1982). Guru Nanak (1469–1539) is the founder of Sikhism, and it is based on the teachings of nine successive Gurus. Notably, Guru Nanak was not previously called *Guru* by his early followers. He was addressed by the respectful title *Baba* (Father). To later generations of Sikhs; however, Guru Nanak was the one who had revealed the truth and enshrined it in works of great beauty. That is why he and his nine successors were considered as Gurus (McLeod 2009). This religion has been commonly known as *Gurmat* or the *Sikh Dharma*. The word “Sikh” derives from the Sanskrit word *sisbya* meaning ‘disciple’ or ‘learner’ and or *sikhsba* meaning “teaching” (Singh 2010).

Caodaism

Caodaism is a native religion of Vietnam (Gobron 2001). It is also popularly known as the monotheistic and syncretic indigenous religion of Vietnam. The official name of the Cao Dai religion is “Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do” meaning The Great Way of the Third Universal Salvation (Blagov 1999). Caodaism officially began its journey in 1926, in Tay Ninh Province in the south of Vietnam. The followers of Caodaism are called the “Caodaists”, and the term “Cao Dai” literally means “a roofless high tower or palace” (Oliver 1976) or the super highness of the position of God where God reigns over the universe. The ambiguity of the meanings might be the outcome of Caodaism’s secret tendency that was maintained during its formative period. As per *Dai Thua Chon Giao*, one of the Cao Dai sacred texts, followers are forbidden from clarifying the terms “Cao Dai” (Blagov 1999). However, it is now a universally accepted concept in the Cao Dai world that the “High Palace or High Tower” refers to God’s absolute transcendence. It is also considered as the “Kingdom of Heaven” or “The Center of the Universe” which holds and directs the energy in order to control and keep the universe in absolute balance (Trinh 2014).

Pluralism in Sikhism

The Sikh concept of religious pluralism is a milestone in the practice of interfaith harmony. All the Gurus of Sikhism followed and propagated the notion of religious harmony and established the belief that all the religions of this world are true. Thus, to be argued that the precondition for being a *sishya* (Sikh) in Sikhism requires practice of empathy and tolerance towards others' faiths so that adherents of different religions can observe and follow their religions without any fear and oppression (Islam and Islam 2016). It was Guru Nanak who dreamt of an egalitarian society devoid of the caste system and forms of religious antagonism. That is why he intended to form a universal religious text which contains spirituality, a philosophy of love, and harmony. It is important to note that Nanak's dream was accomplished by his follower and the fifth Guru, Arjan Dev (1563–1606) in 1603 who compiled the *Adi Granth* that literally signifies "the first book". The *Adi Granth* was the compilation of the Sikh scriptures. Later, *Adi Granth* was supplemented by the compositions of the ninth Guru, which took on its full form in the days of Guru Govind Singh (1666–1708), and renamed the book as the *Guru Granth Sahib*. The Sikh sacred scripture (i.e., the *Adi Granth* and later the *Guru Granth Sahib*) portrays Guru Nanak's philosophy of religious pluralism and harmony. The scripture was installed in the central shrine of Amritsar known as Harimandir Sahib, which eventually became renowned as the Golden Temple (McLeod 2009). Notably, the *Guru Granth Sahib* is not considered a revealed text like the *Qur'an* and the *Bible*, nor are its words considered to be actual words of God. Rather, the materials in this scripture are treated as divinely inspired. The prime reason is that it has absorbed the essences of the divine words both from Hinduism and Islam and incorporated them into it. For example, all the Hindu names, as well as "Allah", are used when mentioning God (Singh 2010). The *Guru Granth Sahib* is also not written by any single author nor even its writers are only the Sikhs. It is undoubtedly perceptible by the identities of the writers of the *Guru Granth Sahib* that this holy scripture appeals to all the *varnas*, and religions of India harmoniously, religiously, spiritually, and emotionally.

The writers were from various backgrounds such as Jaidev of Bengal, Surdas of Awadh, Namadev, Pipa, Sain, Kabir, Ravidas and Bhikhan of Uttar Pradesh, Dhannu of Rajasthan, and Farid of Multan. Kabir was a weaver, Sadhna was a butcher, Namdev a tailor, Dhana a farmer, Sain a barber, Ravidas a cobbler, and Farid a Muslim Sufi (Islam 2011). Despite the diversity of the authors, there is a coherence and harmony to the message that a person should aim to become a perfect human being (Menon 2011).

Furthermore, Guru Nanak is an example of a unique religious figure who never claimed himself as a prophet or redeemer but his fascinating teachings, life examples, and his charismatic influence on humanity made him a divine personality. He tried

throughout his life to eradicate the mutual hatred and violence from the minds of the Hindus and Muslims. Guru Nanak was equally respected by both Hindus and Muslims. Both Hindus and Muslims claimed him to be one of their own. A very popular proverb says: '*Guru Nanak Shah Fakir, Hinduoon ka guru, Masalmano ka peer*' (Nishter 2018). This proverb hails Guru Nanak as a 'guru of Hindus' and 'peer of Muslims.' He to some extent is widely accepted by people of different faiths in Punjab. For example, his Hindu disciples called him "Satguru Nanak Dev" while his Muslim followers considered him "Hazrat Nanak Shah", to the yogis he was "Nanak Nath", while to the Buddhists he was "Nanak Lama" (Dhillon 2013).

Unity of God

Sikhism is unique in defining its concept of 'Ultimate Truth or Reality' or God. The fact is, it rejects the finality of revelation and opens the way for accepting and reaching the "Truth" through different ways (Singh 1980). Sikhism has the extraordinary principle of accepting the truths from all the existing religions and rejects the monopoly, the authority of any certain holy book or religious personality.

In defining the concept of God, Sikhism follows uncompromising monotheism as Judaism and Islam strictly maintain the same. Thus understood, there is no ambiguity in Sikhism in relation with the concept of the oneness of God. In this regard, the very opening hymn of the *Guru Granth Sahib* addresses: "*Ek onkar satnam karata purakh nirbhaw nirvair akal murat ajuni saibhang gur prasad*" (Guru Granth Sahib, 1). This is called the *Mool Mantra* (essential or root teaching) of Sikhism that portrays Sikh God as a singular spirit who is absolutely and indivisibly one; and responsible for His own manifestation (Tiwari 2009; Singh 2010). Now the question is: How to attain the essence of God? As per Sikh theology, paths of attaining the essence of God are open to all. The proper method of attaining the essence of God suggests meditation and a virtuous life (Singh 1980). However, the Sikhs recognize the same God as the Hindus and Muslims worship. In the *Adi Granth*, as it is mentioned:

There is but one God. But Hindus and Muslims think that their God is different from the God of other religions. The one God whom I worship is both Allah and Rama; to the formless one, I bow in my heart. Thus, I have settled the dispute between Hindus and Muslims (*Adi Granth*, 1136).

Now it is obvious that the unity of God in Sikhism presupposes the unity of humanity as all stemmed from a single source. At this point, the *Adi Granth* makes it clear: "The One God is the Father of all, we are all his children; O Guru, O friend, I dedicated my heart to thee; let me have a glimpse of God" (*Adi Granth*, 611). In Sikh scriptures,

the doctrine of the oneness of God has been described with utmost clarity where the freedom of worship for all without any barrier is confirmed. The following verse of the *Adi Granth* attests to this reality as, “God of the Hindus, God of the Muslims is the same. What can the *mullab* and *sbeikh* do if they want to prove them to be different” (*Adi Granth*, 1215).

God in Sikh theology is the ultimate symbol of justness and loving-kindness. God does not discriminate between the sinners and saints and treats both justly based on each person’s actions, words and thoughts. *Karama upar hoe tapavas*, on man’s deeds, are judgments proclaimed (Singh 1980). God is one and to Him, humanity is equal irrespective of religion, color, and nationality. Sikhism rejects the concept of any chosen land and chosen people who are destined to receive superior preferences to God (Islam 2019). God is beyond any kind of external influence and He acts kindly to those who act righteously. In the human sense, God is not a dominating master who always controls His creation, rather God is like a parent, who tries to correct His beloved children. The Gurus have repeatedly compared God’s love with the love of a mother who controls, wields her children to guide them, and even if her children make her angry by straying away from her, mothers cannot but love their children (Singh 1980). Thus, in the love of God, all other loves are rooted. God’s love, in reality, shows the path that God wants unity among humanity and the ultimate condition of love is the profound fraternity and harmony.

Unity of Humanity and Religions

Sikhism did not follow a traditional way. Rather, Sikhism, from its very inception, followed a different path which was one of humility, harmony, justice, and peace. Sikhism was not concerned about the very concepts of conversion, ritualism and was not egoistic to develop distinct norms and rules. As it has been found that from the very beginning Sikhism practiced harmony and unity and that is why Sikhism accepted the good essence of all faiths without any discrimination. In the words of Guru Nanak, the spirit of Sikhism can be understood precisely: “The essence of religion is humility, service, and sympathy” (Bigger 1990, 5). This attests to Guru Nanak’s tough stand against the caste system and social stratifications.

As Nanak had an enlightened heart he stood against the false formalisms and imposed barriers on the way of humanity and equity. With a view to establishing a sustainable casteless society, he initiated *guru ka langar* (free community kitchen) for all irrespective of caste and religion to eat together. In *guru ka langar* or shortly *langar*, everyone prepares food together, eats together sitting on the floor, and wash the used utensils together, thus it testifies the unity and equality of humanity and family. The food that is served in the *langar* is pure vegetarian so that everyone can consume it

and it does not offend anyone's belief and practice (Singh 2009). *Guru ka langar* is associated with *Pangat*, the central concept of Sikhism that means 'straight line' or 'long row.' Following *Pangat* is very essential because this straight line signifies the notion of anti-caste or pro equality (McLeod 2009), and thereby, *Pangat* demolishes the barriers of race, color, religion, and class. One of the cardinal principles of the Sikh faith is *Sangat* that denotes being together. It is the gathering of the Sikh local community or congregation with others. According to Sikhism, *Sangat* is essential for both spiritual and moral inspiration. Guru Nanak gave utmost importance to *Sangat*. In connection with *Sangat*, a popular Sikh saying runs as, "One disciple is a single Sikh, two form a holy association, but where there are five, there is the Ultimate Reality (God) Itself" (Singh 2009, 33)

Next to *Pangat*, *Sangat* is also open for all. With a view to listening to the readings from the holy texts, Sikhs sit on the floor together. Thus, the way *Sangat* functions as if it portrays an inclusive harmonious session for all (Singh 2009). The main purpose of the establishment of *Sangat* was to remove the false barriers of the so-called higher and lower classes. Guru Nanak envisioned harmony and egalitarianism as an institutional structure by establishing *Sangat* and *Pangat* that is called a revolution without shedding blood (Islam 2016).

Unity of religion has been affirmed by Sikhism in many ways. Sikh *Mul-mantra* signifies "One" Supreme being for all and opens the rooms for reaching the singular reality for all. To be spiritual and religious, Sikhism does not allow anyone to renounce their own faith to accept Sikhism. Guru Nanak never asked anyone to become Sikh and to give up their own faith. On the contrary, Guru Nanak advised them to acknowledge their own faith as well as follow their faith both ethically and spiritually. He advised both the Hindus and Muslims to be authentic in their deeds and thoughts in view of the fact that the "One" or "Ultimate" reality is common to all (Singh 2009).

According to the *Janamsakhis*, when Guru Nanak was young, he had his first vision of enlightenment. Guru Nanak went missing for three days and after three days he came back and pronounced the words that formed the basis of Sikhism. He said: "*Nab ko Hindu, Nab Mussalman*" meaning "there is no Hindu, there is no Muslim" (Nesbitt 2005; Menon 2011) This statement has intense significance. In a society that was downtrodden with religious fanaticism, casteism, and rivalry between the religions, especially between Hinduism and Islam regarding the superiority, authenticity, and power, Guru Nanak's statement "*Nab ko Hindu, Nab Mussalman*" was not only bold but also blasphemous.

Through this statement, Guru Nanak neither rejected these two religions, nor vanquished the variety of religions, rather he pointed out the false distinctions among the religions including Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, and so on. The rationale behind that statement was to unite the people of all sects and religions eliminating

hatred and enmity among the people of the different faiths. Guru Nanak stressed the beauty and richness of the varieties of the different faiths and focused on the spirituality and depth of the philosophies of different faiths (Singh 2009).

Guru Nanak had an inquisitive mind to know the different religions and understand the inner philosophies of each religion. His in-depth realization of the truth in religions suggests to him that a true believer in the “oneness” of God can never approve of any division between the followers of different religions. For him, as there is no division of religion before God, neither creed nor a caste is superior before God. As he argues, these differences are artificial and exist in the minds of people. Thus, what he explains is that God created everyone without division, and that before him everyone is equal (Menon 2011).

As Guru Nanak envisioned social unity, he started it with the mission of establishing harmonious relationships among people from different faiths. His stances were clear, he denied the categorization of religions and opposed the hoarding of the valuable philosophies within the upper class and priestly class of each religion. That is why he collected the meaningful philosophies, verses, and examples from the existing religions and incorporated them into the *Guru Granth Sabib* so that everyone comes to know about the commonness and beauty of each other’s religions and follows it overcoming caste, religion, and gender prejudices.

Once Guru Nanak was asked, “Which is the greater religion – Hinduism or Islam?” Nanak answered: “Without good deeds, both lead only to suffering, neither Hindu nor Muslim finds refuge in (God’s court)” (McLeod 2000, 43). That means only good deeds are countable to God, and this will ensure the reunion with God. That should be the common good of life. As Majumdar (1967) states about Guru Nanak, “From all associations with prevailing sectarian religions. His was the first and also the last successful attempt to bring together the Hindus and Muslims in a common fold of spiritual and social brotherhood” (Majumdar 1967, 569).

The fifth, Guru Arjan, stated that the essence of the all-true religions is the same, some call it Rama, some call it Khuda; some worship it as Vishnu; some pray to Allah. Guru Gobind Singh echoed Guru Arjan’s words by saying: “. . .Hindus and Muslims are one! The same reality is the creator and preserver of all; know no distinctions between them. The monastery and the mosque are the same; so is the Hindu form of worship (*puja*) and the Muslim prayer (*namaz*). Humans are all one” (*Guru Granth Sabib*, as cited in Singh 2009). He further says that “*Sarab dbarm meh serast dbarm, Har ko naam jap, nirmal karam,*” which means: of all the religions, the best religion is to remember the name of God and to do the good deeds (*Guru Granth Sabib*, 266).

No Sikh Guru has ever said that their religion is only true or acceptable to God. They strictly forbade dishonoring others’ faiths and scriptures. Sheikh Kabir, who has profound contribution and impact on Sikhism states that: “Do not say the scriptures

of the Semitic religions are false, do not say the religions of India are false, false is he, who does not act according to these scriptures and who does not reflect upon them correctly” (Nishter 2010). The Sikh Gurus had profound respect for the religions and the holy persons of the different faiths. For example, Guru Nanak’s respect towards the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was known to all. He said: *Dikba Nur Mobammadi, Dikba Nabi Rasul, Nanak Qudrat Dekbke Khudi Gaye Saab bbool*, which means: “I have seen the divine aura of Muhammad (with inner eyes), I have seen the prophets and the messengers of God. After contemplating the glory of God and his messages, my ego has been eliminated” (Khan 1967; Islam 2019). The third Guru Amar Das in his words showed how to respect all the religions and through his prayers, he requested God to save humanity from the ongoing vices. Guru Arjan says: “*Jagat jalanda rakb laye apni kirpa dbar. Jit dwarai ubrai thitbai labu uba’r*,” which means, “O God, the world is now tormented and burning, be merciful and save all those whoever come from any passage, through different religions and faiths” (*Guru Granth Sahib*, 853).

Sikh Gurus did not confine their harmonious zeal to the concept, rather they had implemented it in their actions. Guru Arjan had profound respect for Hazrat Mian Mir, a celebrated Sufi. Mian Mir laid the foundation stone of the Shri Harmandir Sahib, popularly known as the Golden Temple (Islam 2016; Nishter 2010). In reality, it is unprecedented that a Muslim was invited to lay the foundation stone of the major temple of another religion. At the same time, it is understood that Sikhism had reached the hearts of people of that time and that is why people like Hazrat Mian Mir did not hesitate to contribute to lay the foundation stone of the Sikh temple. Islam (2016) opines that this is enough instance to prove and understand the magnanimity and universality of Sikhism. It is also important to note that Sikh temples and institutions are named after some non-Sikhs such as Gurdwara Moulavi Patti Likhi also known as Gurdwara Patti Sahib, Gurdwara Majnu Tilla, a Sufi saint, Gurdwara Farid Tilla, Gurdwara Haji Rattan, and Gurdwara Mata Kaulan (a Muslim woman). The name of the university guest house of Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar is named “Sheikh Sajjan Guest House”, the guest house of Punjabi University, Patiala, is named as “Waris Bhavan” in the name of Waris Shah, a Punjabi Sufi poet (Nishter 2010).

Pluralism in Caodaism

Vietnam is a country with rich cultural elements and religious diversities. It is noteworthy to mention that Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism along with other indigenous Vietnamese traditions flourished together without confronting or challenging each other. The reason behind this phenomenon was the assimilative approach of the Vietnamese people to welcome and accept foreign cultural elements by blending them into their native culture (Trinh 2014). That is why it was natural for the

Vietnamese cultures as a whole to reflect the effects of different historical elements of colonialism alongside different religious vibes. This socio-cultural milieu of the South of Vietnam had a significant impact on the origin of Caodaism to be developed in the form of syncretism (Blagov 1999), which linked to other Asian religions including Western philosophical thoughts that existed in Vietnam (Oliver 1976). Thus, many of these elements are found to have been adopted from Buddhism, especially from Mahayana Buddhism, mixed with elements from Confucianism and Taoism. The Buddhist idea of “the good man”, for example, played the role in forming the basis of Cao Dai ethics. Vietnamese taboos and sanctions have been incorporated into the ideal behavioral scheme of the disciples of Caodaism (Hickey 1964). The syncretic nature of this religion is identified through its organizational structure, theology, philosophy, and ritual practices (Oliver 1976).

Unity of God

Although the concept of God in Caodaism is monotheistic, Cao Dai theology complicates this monotheism by allowing the followers to worship a Mother Goddess. However, the unity of God, in Caodaism, presupposes the unity of humanity. Caodaism, thus, emerged to unite humanity, and the God of Caodaism stands by all to prevent further conflict (Gobron 1950; Oliver 1976). The Supreme Being has explained the rationale of His “Oneness” in one of His messages:

After creating the universe, I divided My spirit and with it made all creatures, plants, and materials. Everything in this universe comes from My spirit, and therefore has a life. Where there is life, there is Me even in materials and plants. I am each of you and you are Me (*Thanh Ngon Hiep Tuen- Selection of Selected Holy Messages*, 1972, as cited in Bui & Beck 2000, 19).

Through this message it has been implied that all the things in this universe have shared basic principles and a similar conscience that suggests the oneness of God’s creation. It is explained in Vietnamese as *Nbut Bon Tan Van Thu* meaning from one, emanates many, and *Van Thu Qui Nbut Bon* meaning from many, emanates one (Bui and Beck 2000). In Cao Dai theology, God is considered to be the only cause of the unity of microcosm and macrocosm. As it is explained, “God is you and you are God” (Blagov 1999; Thanh 1970; Oliver 1976). The most prolific sign of unity in Caodaism is the symbol of the “Celestial Eye”. This is not just a symbol for the Caodaists, rather it is the most respectful and venerable object to the believers of Caodaism. This Celestial Eye symbolizes the “Universal Unity” and the “Unique Truth”. It is a symbol of “One Eye” most accurately the left eye which reflects the Positive Yang-Duong Principle (Blagov 1999).

Unity of Humanity and Religions

In Cao Dai theology, it has been reaffirmed that the goal of Caodaism is to unite humanity, and it is the ultimate will of God. The emergence of Caodaism brings salvation which will ensure the perfectionism of the harmony of humanity including all religions, and even the animal and plant kingdom based on tolerance, love, justice, and peace. This is the third era of salvation and this is the high time all should unite for greater peace. Caodaism emphasizes the unity of humanity and religions. According to Caodaism, all religions are for truth. Unfortunately, people failed to be truly religious, and they adopted the way of separatism, denied eternal, universal diversity, and developed personal arrogance and racism. The approach of Caodaism towards this disharmonious situation is a universal one. The universality of Caodaism can be explained through its philosophy of “oneness” based on the fundamental concept of one principle that all the religions are from the same God, and there is no scope for discord.

Caodaism has widely been marked as a religion that is “fundamentally, deliberately syncretic” (Smith 1970, 574). It is also perceived that Caodaism, both a social movement and religion, follows syncretistic features in its organizational structures, philosophy, theology, and ritual practices (Oliver 1976, 1). Syncretism can be tentatively defined as the borrowing, affirmation or integration of concepts, symbols, or practices of any one or more religious traditions by another religion through a process of selection and reconciliation (Berling 1980, 10). These tendencies are common or perhaps central to Vietnamese religious life. Importantly, syncretic borrowing may not be entirely conscious, but it is understood that syncretism is not a (Blagov 1999, 21).

Religious amalgamation is universal in Vietnamese life, and in some cases, its content varies from place to place. For example, to some Vietnamese, any place which is sacred was appropriate for worship. Phạm Công Tắc identifies “another consequence of that tendency of Vietnamese that, paradoxically, because of possessing too many religions in Vietnamese religious life, they became atheistic” (Tắc 1970, 85–86). For Caodaism, it is said that this religion is not the overt outcome of “syncretism”. The syncretism was natural and most perfectly can be identified as the “grassroots” syncretism of Vietnam. The advent of Caodaism enriched that traditional grassroots Vietnamese syncretism, and this new religious doctrine contains numerous elements of the preexisting syncretic amalgamation that became an integral part of this religion (Hickey 1964).

According to the followers of Caodaism, the Cao Dai doctrine brings forth the synthesis of five great teachings of the past: Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, ancestor cult, and Western religions. It is believed that synthesis of the teachings will show new teaching to overcome the intolerance of the past salvations. Some parts of Caodaist prayer signify the concept of the harmony of five great teachings. One such example is as follows:

My Brethren, My Sisters, I ask you to pray
 and sing the praises of Him who gives life.
 I bring flowers of five colors.
 As all colors are found in the white of the
 faith, so all beliefs are of one. (Blagov 1999, 44).

Although there is a paucity of details, it is assumed that Caodaism has been documented as a syncretism of the Vietnamese “Three-Religion” (Tam Giao) system (Blagov 1999). This three-religion system denotes the amalgamation of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Despite Caodaism organizationally affirming that it has taken a departure from the ancient Vietnamese practices, its ideology is highly derived from the three-religion tradition along with the existing Vietnamese belief systems at large (Werner 1980).

It is believed that these three religions are the three branches of a common stem that existed from prehistoric periods. These three religions grew from the common stem, and that stem is the religion of the Universe, its parts, and phenomena. De Groot (1912) describes it as the teachings seemed to be a doctrine of Universalism, actually being “the one religion.” These three religions are the core of Caodaism and the colors of the Cao Dai religious banner: yellow, blue, and red are viewed as the symbolization of these three great teachings and stand for the unity of “Three Religions”. The red color symbolizes Confucianism, yellow is associated with Buddhism, and blue emblemizes Taoism (Blagov 1999). This symbolization theory was revealed in the early stage of the movement (Tan, 1974). These three colors have deeper meanings which explain the goals of Caodaism. The red color implies the symbol of authority, yellow stands for morality, and the blue represents tolerance. It is understood that there is no association between the three colors and three periods of revelations (Tan 1974; Blagov 1999).

Cao Dai philosophy explains the manifestation of this new religion: All the pre-existing religions and their adherents had submitted the authority of those religions to the human founders, and that was opposed to the Universality. This is because the human founders and the prophets rose up, declining the truths of other religions, showing obvious intolerance (Gobron 1950). Cao Dai doctrine includes the concept of Karmic law which holds that incarnation and life after death depend on the present deeds (Hum and Beck 2000).

In a spiritist message it has been affirmed that the emergence of Caodaism is meant for humanity and harmony: “Out of Love and Mercy, out of respect for life, I have founded the Great Way’s Third Revelation to save the earthly human, to help the virtuous attain a world of peace and avoid reincarnation to the earthly world of suffering” (Hum and Beck 2000). The essence of interreligious harmony of Caodaism is rooted in its concept of universal love and this universal love extends towards love and kindness for animals and plants. Caodaism emphasizes the formation of a universal

family, based on brotherhood and sisterhood. Caodaism gives importance to the duties towards animals considering them as their brethren behind them in the process of evolution. That is why, they must be treated with gentleness in any services so that they should not suffer needlessly. All animal's lives must be respected and harming them will delay the evolution of the victim. Consequently, all the Caodaists are conscious about their duties, and for this reason, they prefer a vegetarian diet to avoid further transgressions. They realize that humans frequently commit transgressions in their daily lives. As Schopenhauer connects a link between pity towards animals and kindness of soul, "there is a close link: we may say without hesitating, that when an individual is cruel toward beasts, he will not be a just man" (Blagov 1999).

Caodaism heightens the service to one's neighbor and affirms that it completes the goal of the human fraternity (Blagov 1999). Caodaism urges humanity to find happiness in living together because living a secluded life is not worth living. As noted, the goal of Caodaism is to establish global harmony, including interreligious, intra-religious, and intercultural harmony. Indeed, a universal family should be formed consisting of humanity, animals, and plants with varieties of varieties of cultures, languages, religions, colors, and species. In searching for the way to God, one can find that the origin of all the species is the same. All are from the same God, and this realization is very needed for establishing harmony in this world. This is the principle of humanity and Caodaism gives stress on humanity, services to one's neighbor as the fundamentals of religions. Services, not necessarily always to be physical, and economic, that can be readiness to help his or her fellowmen in every circumstance either by his acts or even by his good thoughts, wishes, and sweet words (Blagov 1950).

Caodaism firmly holds the principle of equality and harmonious unity between men and women. Women are equally granted to take part in both administrative and religious affairs including the priesthood. Caodaism preaches, the world of unity has been offered by God through the Third Alliance and it is meant for peace (Oliver 1976). Caodaism offers this world a great opportunity for peace, tolerance and empathy gleaned from unity and harmony. Mutual understanding and empathy are inevitable for the harmony between the great cultures of East and West. This religion offers sensitive solutions meant to spiritual heal the troubled world. Caodaism believes that ongoing world problems notably racism, intolerance, and ignorance can be solved through a spiritual solution.

Analysis of Interfaith Harmony: Sikh and Cao Dai Perspectives

Sikhism and Caodaism do not force or influence anyone to convert into Sikhism and Caodaism. Both of the religions give emphasis to interfaith harmony and bringing back primordial harmony with God. Guru Nanak's approach was different from other

religious founders. To promote harmony and recompilation, he urged the Hindus to be good Hindus and Muslims to be good Muslims. His philosophy was kept simple to lead to interreligious harmony and brotherhood. Unlike Caodaism, Sikh theology does not propagate any “combination of religions” nor was it founded upon the basis of any one or more particular religions. For Caodaism, the basic tenet, i.e., monotheism corresponds to the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Bahá’í conviction, and on the other hand, the “spiritist” sources and its doctrinal character are in agreement with Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism. As religions, society, culture, and ideologies work as an integrated complex, similarities between a new religion and the old ones are natural. No religion in an absolute sense can be regarded as a pure distinct type of religion without having a single similarity with the previous religions and existing cultural values. Caodaism followed a syncretic approach without uprooting its “spiritist” origin and indigenous elements. Importantly, Caodaism invariably assimilated into a homogenous tradition that can be called a synthesis of great teachings.

On the other hand, the Sikh concept of absolute monotheism has a deep connection with Islam; however, the concept of reincarnation and rebirth seems to be the adoption from Hinduism. For Sikhism, those similarities are not blind imitations. This ideology is greatly influenced by the personal experiences and contemplations of Guru Nanak that he realized from a very young age. It is important to note that although Sikhism followed the same way in collecting and synthesizing the great teachings of the world, the Sikhs refuse to claim their religion as a “synthesis of different faiths.” There is a dilemma associated with Sikhism that the religion is often regarded as one of the sects of Hinduism. But this claim has no actual grounds of justification. Theologically and popularly, Hinduism stands on the three most important pillars, such as the Vedas, the caste system (not the caste system of grading people based on their birth and race, but on their work), and the concept of God that includes a large pantheon of deities. With regard to Sikhism, the religion is not based on any of these three elements, and there is no such concept in it that resembles any of these three pillars. Thus, both of the religions are rich in unique terms of their philosophies and doctrines that fill certain vacuums. Likewise, both provide faith and shelter for their followers and fulfill all the criteria to be noted as “independent” religions of the world (Myhre 2009).

Caodaism and Sikhism were much ahead of their times and endorsed the most systematic approaches in reducing social, religious, and psychological gaps that existed among the people. As it has been found, the fundamental concept of Sikhism and Caodaism is the “unity of God,” and that unity of God in its pure form rejects the hierarchy of social status and any other pseudo differences regarding the social status, race, gender, and religions.

Sikhism has witnessed the deterioration of human dignity in the name of caste and gender. Guru Nanak’s first prophetic message was “there is no Hindu, no Muslim.” This

message is short but emphasized and pointed towards the very basic and innate concept of unity, equity, equality, human dignity, and humanity. This message itself alone stood for the voice of the oppressed and the realization of the falsity of gender and caste biases. Sikhism promoted the world to be with a single race in the name of humanity, free from all kinds of racial, national, gender, religious, and caste-based biases. Guru Nanak and the other nine influential Gurus were determined to the fact that this world should be a just one, and there should be a perfect balance of emotions, desires, and thoughts among humanity. Making a certain group elite and keeping others submerged in superstition and illiteracy, is regressive and the opposite of development and integrity thus chaos is bound to happen in any society like this.

Comparative analysis shows that the Cao Dai concept of the unity of humanity has its footing on the fundamental principles confirmed in 1946 that is “the adoration of God”; “the Father of all” (Gobron 1950). This doctrine foregrounds the universalistic attitude of Caodaism that views that all humanity is the members of a single universal family. Both Caodaism and Sikhism promote the way to divinize humanity by breaking away the parochial illusion of caste, creed, nationality, color, race, language, gender, and religion. An ecumenical and universal fraternity, according to Caodaism and Sikhism, is essential for uniting the Ultimate Reality that God is One with diverse names. Consequently, this ultimate reality rejects the misconceptions of God and monopoly of religions.

Both Sikhism and Caodaism have addressed the social problems more pragmatically and eliminated the cocoon of individualistic or anthropocentric patterns. Both of them have formulated an effective structure of understanding the importance of the environment including animals, plants, and other non-organic elements of the environment. The Sikh concept of *Sarbat Da Bhala* denotes a corporate character that suggests selfless service to all including the environment. The *Sarbat Da Bhala* is a deep philosophical thought that should not be confined to only humanity. It is holistic in approach and suggests the dynamic, progressive attitude of Sikhism towards nature.

Historically, Caodaism witnessed the twentieth-century problems from the beginning; and for the Vietnamese, wars and their disastrous consequences are part of their history, and this resulted in the growth of environmental consciousness simultaneously to the consciousness of humanity and brotherhood. This consciousness is the principal part of the Cao Dai faith, and its emphasis is placed in a prayer to Duc Cao Dai:

The life of the heart to love all human beings, all beings, to love all life, all divine life, angelic, human, animal, vegetable, mineral, and atomic life. I ask you to love the earth, water, fire, air, the pebbles of the road, and the stars of the heavens. Position of order in repose. That of rest which must be an act of grace (Blagov 1999, 43).

Both Sikhism and Caodaism agree on the point that the “unity of humanity” paves the way for interfaith harmony leading to social stability. Caodaism and Sikhism stemmed from the very concept of tolerance and interfaith harmony that make these two religions unique. Caodaism is “millenarian” in its outlook as it professes that the “Third Universal Era of Salvation” was an event that was fated to occur. This is because people have distorted the unity of God by misinterpreting and exploiting the words and guidance of God. Besides, according to Caodaism, the previous two salvations faced linguistic, cultural, spatial, and racial barriers, in this third era, God chose to connect with the people to ensure the primordial unity of the divine Supreme Being and dismiss the doctrine of any fourth era of salvation. Caodaism explains that the need for a third amnesty is the consequence of the limitations of the previous faiths, but this does not reject the previous faiths at all. Caodaism is about bridging the gaps caused by the nature of human frailty and evil motives of some people. It is the Caodaist hope that through this new amnesty of salvation, the unity of the Great Ways will be formed.

On the other hand, Sikhism is not a millenarian religion and does not have any such concept of a salvific era. According to Sikhism, all religions are intact in their own positions. It is the fault of the people, especially those who attempt to materially profit from religions, and it is because of such people that the faithful have difficulty maintaining their convictions. Guru Nanak repeatedly said: “Do not call the Muslims that their religion is false, do not call the Hindus that their religion is not true, those who do so are nothing but the liars and traders of falsity” (Islam 2019, 9). In both religions, it has been ensured that none of the religions are false, but were rather misunderstood or distorted by misguided individuals in the past or at present. That is what causes the problems of intolerance and bloodshed.

The confusing part of studying interfaith harmony and unity of humanity is the assumption that “unity” implies “uniformity.” While uniformity is turning all into one, unity is for becoming united for a common goal. If we perceive the common goal as “peace”, then it is the obligatory responsibility to be united for peace. In the domain of theoretical and practical approaches to interfaith dialogue, a search for identifying the commonality and common ground is inevitable. Without finding and reaching the common goal, the appeal and necessity of interfaith dialogue vanishes. The common goals may be global peace, social cohesion, and inclusive harmony. In brief, the motive of dialogue is to reach a solution, based on understanding and genuine empathy. This solution could be related to any certain problem not necessarily always directly connected to inter or intra-faith harmony.

Both Caodaism and Sikhism are clear in their position on the concept of “unity.” Caodaism and Sikhism believe in freedom of religion and reject the concept of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* which means “outside the Church no salvation” (Hartney 2008). Both religions are universal in nature and outspoken about their syncretic nature.

Caodaism affirms that Cao Dai (the path being taught) without being Cao Dai is the true Cao Dai; more elaborately, various religions contain the one primordial truth that is Cao Dai (God). If the Cao Dai religion defines Dao Cao Dai (the path of God) as a separate entity and as the only true path, it would not be true Cao Dai. It would be truly Cao Dai if it embraces all the paths towards God (Bui & Beck 2000). Sikhism is identical with this view. God, in Sikhism, is not a separate entity. As it has been mentioned before, Guru Nanak called the God “True Name” (Satnam) and avoided any particular name (Nesbett 2005).

Conclusion

Relative to their size and influence, Sikhism and Caodaism are among the lesser understood religions of the world, and there are plenty of contexts wherein the two remain deeply misunderstood. Sikhism, although one of the world religions, has been miscoded from its very inception as a blend of Hinduism and Islam. Unfortunately, still to a large section of people and even to some scholars, Sikhism is a sect of Hinduism. Thus, Sikhism is still brawling for its recognition as an independent religion (Islam and Islam, 2016). Caodaism is another independent religion of the world that had its origin in Vietnam, but to the majority of the world, this religion is unknown. In the academic field of religions, Eastern religions have gained late introduction compared to Western ones. For Caodaism, some have challenged that Caodaists themselves share some responsibility for the religion being misunderstood by the West. This is because, in the early stages, it was the deliberate intention of the Caodaists to conceal their activities from others and especially from the French. It has also been claimed that it is a traditional tendency of Vietnamese religious sects to maintain secrecy about their innermost belief system and that has resulted in a small amount of literature on Caodaism in French and English (Smith 1970).

To meet this gap, Sikhism and Caodaism have been explored from religious and academic perspectives to comply with the standard of the academic study of religion as well as to give a better understanding of research themes. As the fundamental rule of the comparative study of religion, neutrality and empathy have been followed in identifying similarities and differences between the religions. Unnecessary criticisms and discussions on the weak and strong points of these two religions have been avoided to make the current study consistent with the research problem.

Through this study it can be ascertained that Sikh and Cao Dai concepts of interfaith harmony and unity have been accepted by a number of people as being of great value. Not necessarily that all of them had converted to Sikhism and Caodaism, but the philosophy of harmony of these religions attracted the attention of people of irrespective religions. Today, their appeal is still relevant to the common people. If

their concepts were vague and irrelevant, they would surely have been lost in the abyss of time. In this highly competitive global era, both Caodaism and Sikhism are attaining prominence throughout the world, and that suggests that to many people, teachings and philosophies of Sikhism and Caodaism matter significantly.

The research issues discussed in this article are pertinent to the contemporary academic domain. Interfaith harmony is arising to a status of utmost significance in world affairs in dealing with multiple global problems. Today, religion, religious harmony, and other religion-related affairs are no longer considered as personal convictions, but rather they are considered to have pragmatic significance, indispensable to cope with problems like intolerance, extremism, and global terrorism. The necessity of studying religions could be finely understood by Kung's words: "No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundation of the religions" (Boase 2005, 16). This research is relevant to both academic and non-academic pursuits. Thus, this article opens up significant scope for further intensive, analytical, and explorative research on interfaith harmony.

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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