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Part Three: Economic and Cultural Issues

The Emergence of Hòa Hảo Buddhism under the Dual Franco–Japanese Administration

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Introduction

Hòa Hảo Buddhism, which formally appeared in 1939, can be defined in various different ways: as a new religious movement, an expression of renovated Buddhism, a new form of local messianism whose roots lay in the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religious sect, or a "crisis cult." My approach here is to view Hòa Hảo Buddhism (known at the time as *Đạo Xen*) first and foremost as a new religious movement; the objective of this study is to focus on the stages of its evolution in terms of community structures and its social and doctrinal institutionalization. To do so, we must consider the "internal dynamic" of its founder's actions and the evolution of his religious thought, as well as the emergence of a collective consciousness and organization which gave shape to a religious community where originally there had been nothing but a millenarian movement. At the same time, we must also study the "external dynamic," meaning the sociopolitical context which permitted the appearance of this religious movement and shaped its evolution.

For any religious movement, the foundational years are always the most important for understanding the process of putting in place its original religious ideas, followed by the changes made by the founder himself or by his first followers. Yet it is often precisely this stage which is the most poorly documented and the most subject to debate and different interpretations. This is the case for Hòa Hảo Buddhism, the subject of our study. Because of the particularly chaotic context of the time, Hòa Hảo is usually studied only from 1945 onward, at the point where the August Revolution broke out. The first five years of its history are thus reduced to nothing more than a prologue for those events. Yet those years are crucial to understanding how the prophetic figure Huỳnh Phú Sổ developed, how his charisma evolved, how his writings began to branch out in different directions, and how and why the Hòa Hảo religious community took shape even before the political and military events of the anti-colonial struggle had begun their irreversible course.

A brief look at the historiography of this religion shows that Hòa Hảo Buddhism is of course often mentioned in Vietnamese and Western writings which focus on Vietnam's recent political history, i.e., the history of the revolution, the anticolonial struggle, and the successive wars between 1945 and 1975. It must be acknowledged, however, that the Hòa Hảo remains poorly understood in many respects, particularly its sociocultural aspects, which help explain the rapid and very localized emergence of this

religious community as well as its doctrinal innovations *vis-à-vis* earlier forms of millenarianism (Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương and Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa) and other forms of revived Buddhism, both Mahayana (lay associations, *tịnh độ cư sĩ Phật hội*, *hệ phái khất sĩ*) and also Theravada (Khmer and Viet, which appeared during the same period). All of these were being articulated by the early 1940s in the context of the Second World War and the Japanese Occupation of French Indochina. Work has been done on the involvement of political-religious sects during the period 1941–45: the Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo, Buddhists, or other organizations linked to "para-religious" secret societies. Research by Trần Mỹ Vân, for example, provides a good synthesis explaining the context for the emergence of the political organizations which sought to regain national independence through some degree of effective support from the Japanese forces present in the colony and through efforts to find support from "political-religious forces."[1] Very few studies, though, have approached this period through the lens of social or religious history.

What I wish to do here, as has been the general direction for my doctoral research (currently being prepared for publication), is to shed new light on the as yet poorly understood emergence and institutionalization of Hòa Hảo Buddhism as a religious phenomenon by focusing on the "internal dynamic" mentioned above. It appears crucial to me to move away from a chronology based only on a political and national interpretation of events in order to have as good a grasp as possible of local developments inside the religious movement. The years 1941–45, then, were not merely a time of political struggle between the Vietnamese independence movements seeking to politicize Huỳnh Phú Sổ and engage his followers in the struggle, on the one hand, and on the other, the French colonial administration trying to maintain its authority through efforts to disseminate among the local populations the values of the National Revolution as laid down in France by Marshal Pétain, along with the Japanese administration which was trying to take advantage of the situation to develop its Asian Co-prosperity Sphere. This period can also be seen as a new phase in the social, cultural, and political evolution of the religious situation and, more specifically, a new phase in Huỳnh Phú Sổ's intellectual maturing and the start of religious institutionalization. This change on the part of a "millenarian movement" which sought to build itself into a new religious movement naturally provoked a reaction from the French colonial authorities, but also from the Japanese forces which were acting in parallel, in competition, and sometimes in opposition to the French during this period.

1. Hòa Hảo Buddhism at the Time of the Japanese Arrival

At the point when Japan began its direct involvement in French Indochina, Huỳnh Phú Sổ had already been developing his reputation as a Living Buddha and disseminating his prophecies for some three years, since 1939. A brief reminder of the short history of this Vietnamese religion which appeared in the western Mekong Delta, its symbolic beginning dated to the 18th day of the 5th lunar month of the year Kỷ Mão, corresponding to July 4, 1939 on the Gregorian calendar. On that day

[1] See in particular Trần Mỹ Vân, "Beneath the Japanese Umbrella: Vietnam's Hòa Hảo during and after the Pacific War," *Crossroads*, 17, 1 (2003): 60–107.

Huỳnh Phú Sổ, a young man aged twenty-one from a middle peasant family in Cochinchina, made a public announcement in his native village regarding terrible calamities which were going to occur. To this end he reinterpreted the basic teachings of a form of messianic Buddhism which would bring redemption and open up a path to salvation. Sổ's action ended a long period of sickness from an undetermined illness which had led him to leave his native Hòa Hảo village and travel to the Seven Mountains (Thất Sơn) range to stay among hermits with healing and spiritual powers which were passed down from teacher to disciple.

The birth of this cult, originally called *Đạo Xen*, needs to be understood within the context of the renovation movement affecting Buddhist societies in Asia, which had been growing stronger for three decades. The most important factor was Huỳnh Phú Sổ's appearance as a charismatic figure and the immediate publication of his prophecies. These were brought together in several small collections of poetic texts (*sấm giảng*) which reshaped the millenarian belief of the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương from the mid-19th century. In the eyes of the local population, Huỳnh Phú Sổ represented the messianic figure of *Phật Thầy Tây An* (Buddha Master of Western Peace), who had created this form of Buddhist millenarianism.

By March 1940, the French colonial authorities were concerned about this new case of mysticism which had the potential to provoke social unrest. They arrested Huỳnh Phú Sổ, placed him under psychiatric observation, and eventually placed him under house arrest in Bạc Liêu. At the end of 1942, they decided to exile him to Laos. It was at this point that the Japanese forces began their direct intervention in Huỳnh Phú Sổ's story and, through him, in the history of Hòa Hảo Buddhism.

2. The Stakes of Information: Huỳnh Phú Sổ, the French Sûreté and the *Kempeitai*

On May 6, 1941 an economic cooperation agreement had been signed between France and Japan; three days later, the Tokyo Convention formalized an agreement of mutual recognition and political understanding. Last of all, the agreement signed in Vichy between Admiral Darlan and Ambassador Kato on July 29, 1941 stipulated the principle of "common defense" in the event of external aggression and guaranteed the Japanese army complete freedom of deployment and movement on Cochinchinese territory. As Masaya Shiraishi puts it, "at the point when the Pacific War was about to begin, the Japanese had succeeded in getting what they wished in Indochina, both militarily and economically. Now they could consider Indochina as their own colony without getting rid of the French administration."[2]

Japan could hope to find support in Cochinchina, particularly among supporters of Prince Cường Để, the Phục Quốc League, and the Cao Đài organizations.[3] And contacts were already in place thanks to the involvement of Consul General Yoshio Minoda and businessman Mitsuhiro Masushita of the

[2] Masaya Shiraishi, "La présence japonaise en Indochine 1940–1945," *in* Paul Isoart ed., *L'Indo-Chine française 1940–1945* (Paris: PUF, 1982), p. 217.

[3] Decree (*Arrêté*) no. 4509, dated 22 August 1940, closed the main Cao Đài temple at Tây Ninh, 15 of the 79 officially recognized smaller temples, and the charitable houses (*phước thiện*).

Dainan Koshi. The Japanese do not appear to have been very familiar with Huỳnh Phú Sổ before this point, but the French decision to exile him to Laos in October 1942 provided them with the opportunity to support him by intercepting him *en route* and relocating him to Saigon. There are differing interpretations of this sequence of events, but the interception took place through the collusion of individuals close to Huỳnh Phú Sổ—notably his uncle Lâm Thọ Cưu and Lương Trọng Tường, who worked for the Japanese and was close to a man named Kimura who recruited interpreters together with someone called Moshizuki—who were able to request the active support of the Japanese Army. French documents mention an Adjutant Kimura and someone named Kishi, also known as Katamura. In order to neutralize the *Sûreté*'s authority over Huỳnh Phú Sổ, the Japanese claimed to suspect him of supporting the Guomindang government in Chongqing, and thus they made him a political prisoner. Sổ was settled in Saigon under Japanese (*Kempeitai*) protection—an attack on the authority of the colonial government. The Japanese were henceforth in a position to monitor Sổ's writings (and even to facilitate the dissemination of political tracts in his name) as well as his activities and his charisma. Through him they hoped to gain control over part of the Mekong Delta, where most of his followers lived.

This stay in Saigon can be seen as the second stage of Huỳnh Phú Sổ's initiation. The first, which he had carried out in the Thất Sơn mountains, was said to have been a mystical initiation, while the second broadened his horizons and gave him an understanding of political action. Yet it is difficult to retrace Sổ's activities in Saigon because few documents mention them. It is equally difficult to assess his autonomy insofar as he was under Japanese surveillance and perhaps under their influence.

Since the beginning of 1943, in fact, rumors had been rife of uprisings by the Cao Đài and Đạo Xen, but nothing happened. "Anti-French spirit messages" attributed to Huỳnh Phú Sổ were circulating. In the course of a search carried out on March 24, 1943 at the home of a photographer in Bạc Liêu known to have contacts with the Japanese company Shiota and its local representative Norifumi Kobayashi, the authorities discovered an attempt to make use of Huỳnh Phú Sổ's charisma: "Lê Minh Tông confessed to having produced, at the request of Lương Văn Tương, head of the Chief-of-Staff unit, propaganda cards with a photomontage including the pictures of the Mikado, Cường Để, and Huỳnh Phú Sổ."[4] Later that year, there was more trouble: in Long Xuyên and Châu Đốc provinces, certain activities—selling off animals and taking refuge in the Thất Sơn—showed that the local population was particularly receptive to messages announcing the end of the world. In May there is also known to have been a plan by Phục Quốc militants to send Huỳnh Phú Sổ to meet Cường Để in Japan.

Faced with such developments, the French authorities attempted to react and requested, unsuccessfully, that Huỳnh Phú Sổ be "handed back" to them. They were afraid of unrest in the Mekong Delta. In August a religious meeting was held among Hòa Hảo and Cao Đài leaders and Cambodian monks in

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4 "Rapport mensuel de la Sûreté de Cochinchine," 16 March–15 April 1943 (ANOM HCI-CP 161) [Archives Nationales d'Outre-mer, fonds Haut-Commissariat de France pour l'Indochine, Conseiller politique, dossier 161]. Lê Minh Tông explained that this design (9×12 cm) represented a map of Indochina on which were superimposed portraits of the Mikado over Hanoi, Cường Để over Huế et Huỳnh Phú Sổ over Saigon; this is confirmed by Dật Sĩ and Nguyễn Văn Hầu, *Thất Sơn mầu nhiệm* (Sài Gòn: Từ Tâm, 1972), pp. 240–41.

the area of Nhà Bàn, the location of one of the first Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương communities in southern Châu Đốc. Did this meeting have any links to the "umbrella revolt" which had taken place in Phnom Penh the previous year? The question cannot be answered with any certainty, but confronted with the risk of trouble, the *Sûreté* successfully dealt with these activities and neutralized groups preparing to shift to armed action. It also engaged in diplomatic negotiations resulting in the handover of several individuals including Huỳnh Phú Sổ.[5] In addition, Admiral Decoux announced that he would personally make an inspection tour of every province in Cochinchina in order to try and calm down the unrest and demonstrate the stability of colonial authority.

3. The "Internal Dynamic" of Hòa Hảo Buddhism: Becoming More Autonomous and Less "Eschatological"

At another level, for Huỳnh Phú Sổ this was a time of action, the time for his prophecies to come true, specifically the prediction of the end of the world that he had now been announcing for four years. This had yet to occur. Once more he was forced to push back his prediction and this time around announce that "sensational events will occur next February." He then revealed that "his supporters would take advantage of a bombing in Saigon to unleash an insurrection."[6] By deliberately maintaining a moderate position toward France, Sổ remained out of the *Sûreté*'s reach. The *Đức Thầy* (Holy Teacher) utilised this situation to build up a network to disseminate his prophecies which was parallel to, and separate from, the one which Japanese espionage and nationalist groups imposed on him. This network of itinerant messengers was made up of a small number of Vietnamese women, who attracted less suspicion from the *Sûreté*. The result was that millenarian messages began to reappear during the summer of 1944. These new messages pushed back to the Year of the Cock—the first months of 1945—the Dragon Flower Assembly (*Hội Long Hoa*) during which the Maitreya Buddha would appear to save the believers assembled there. An uprising was to be launched in conjunction with this event.

It was at this point that Huỳnh Phú Sổ mentioned for the first time the possibility that a prophecy might fail to come true. Messengers who had come to meet him, in fact, "were said to have declared in early June that the Đạo Xen sect was giving itself a six-month time limit to act and that after that point, its followers could leave without a second thought."[7] Building on this, on July 11, 1944 Huỳnh Phú Sổ supposedly agreed to calm popular agitation by issuing for the first time an "appeal for calm" among his followers. This did not, however, stop other messages from circulating in his name which praised the "warrior qualities and national pride of the sons of Vietnam" and called for national resistance.

Thus Huỳnh Phú Sổ's ideas were evolving. His mystical passion, still visible in 1943, began to weaken the following year. He began to be conscious of the changes needed within the millenarian move-

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[5] Telegram from Decoux to Papon, n° 1868, 23 Aug. 1943 (ANOM INF 1199) [Indochine Nouveau Fonds, dossier 1199].

[6] "Rapport mensuel de la Sûreté de Cochinchine," 16 September–15 October 1943 (ANOM HCI-CP 161).

[7] "Rapport mensuel de la Sûreté de Cochinchine," 16 May–15 June 1944 (ANOM HCI-CP 161).

ment and his messianic charisma. The challenge was how to structure an "emerging religion"[8] out of a community with a shared practice of Buddhist morality. Such a process takes place through a transformation of millenarian discourse into ethical discourse and through the shift from a prophetic movement to a religious organization which takes the form of either a cult or a Church.[9] In his particularly difficult environment, it appears that Huỳnh Phú Sổ began, in the words of Henri Desroche, to go from "a failed eschatologization to a successful acculturation,"[10] in this context meaning that he drew on millenarian roots directly connected to the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương tradition in order to make Hòa Hảo Buddhism into a moral system which was unified, renewed, and grounded in local cultural realities.

In addition, Huỳnh Phú Sổ sought to maintain his autonomy by taking steps to dissociate his initial religious and messianic function from a forced political commitment, even to the point of adopting a neutral position for a time. This decision also demonstrated his desire to obtain recognition of religious freedom for himself and his followers by "normalizing" his relations with the authorities and establishing a community which practiced the simplified rituals of renovated Buddhism. But events began to move faster at the beginning of 1945 with the Japanese *coup de force* of March 8, causing even more complications for the process of institutionalizing the Hòa Hảo and making it more autonomous.

4. The "External Dynamic" and French–Japanese Rivalries

Beyond their common policy of monitoring Huỳnh Phú Sổ and the social unrest in the Mekong Delta, French and Japanese authorities during this period adopted differing positions on religious developments, which naturally affected the emergence of Hòa Hảo Buddhism. Once Admiral Decoux was named Governor-General of Indochina, the principles of the National Revolution were first imposed through the adoption of a policy contrary to that of the Third Republic (secularist values—*valeurs laïques*—and the civilizing mission—*mission civilisatrice*). Where the native peoples were concerned, Decoux applied the principles of defending peasant societies in a paternalistic manner which were favoured by Marshal Petain. To this end he relied on traditional collective structures: the family, communal organizations, the authority of village notables, and local identities. Thus he sought to restore a social order based on Confucian values, social solidarity, and a return to some degree of religious "orthodoxy" in opposition to the secret societies or those religious movements which were considered purely as subversive or defiant. This was the context for the promulgation of the August 13, 1940 law against secret societies, implemented as an August 19 decree.

An excerpt from Decoux's memoirs is particularly revealing as to his perspective on the religious sit-

[8] "An emerging religion is generally prophetic in its origins, which means that it was established by lay persons opposed to the clergy of established religion. Thus from the beginning it is weighted with an element of protest against the world of common sense… However, the normal fate of an emerging religion, within a relatively short time, is to lose those characteristics which had created tensions between itself and society." See Françoise Champion and Louis Hourmant, "'Nouveaux mouvements religieux' et sectes," *in* Françoise Champion and Martine Cohen ed., *Sectes et démocratie* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), p. 59.

[9] See the writings of the German sociologist and theologian Ernst Troelsch.

[10] Henri Desroche, *Dieux d'hommes. Dictionnaire des messianismes et millénarismes de l'*ère *chrétienne* (Paris: Mouton et EPHE, 1969).

uation:

> For many years these movements [secret societies or political-religious sects] had particularly proliferated in Cochinchina, a very advanced region which our civilization had more or less uprooted from its hereditary traditions and beliefs and whose population, because of this, felt a vague need to rediscover a spiritual ideal.
>
> I am forced to acknowledge that if these sects, or more or less secret societies, had thus flourished until the eve of World War II, especially in southern Indochina, then the weaknesses, errors, and excesses of our policy were partly responsible.
>
> At the time of the original conquest, the Admiral-Governors [who governed Cochinchina under the Second Empire before the shift to a government led by civil servants], who deliberately relied on the [Catholic] missions, had envisioned a general evangelization of the native population. That was a reasonable plan, but the Third Republic would have none of it. The [republican] leaders, however, failed to understand that by systematically secularizing the masses, in so doing they were driving them towards the dangerous activities which I have just mentioned. By joining these movements, the natives—for better or worse—were feeding the secret spiritual need which has always tortured the human soul since the beginning of the ages, in all times and places. The "Cao Đài movement" is a typical example of this. Nor was it the only movement which was worrying French authorities at the time I took office. The "Đạo Xen" sect had been established in Cochinchina in 1939 with a show of witchcraft and the restoration of Buddhism. It too was very politically suspect.[11]

The Decoux administration therefore decided to encourage the creation of certain cultural and religious associations, particularly those aimed at restoring or establishing communal houses (*đình*) housing the village guardian deity. Hòa Hảo village was on the list of priority villages, but this had no impact, as reported by an official who visited there:

> I visited Hòa Hảo village. Everything is sad and dusty: the dilapidated *đình* serving as the communal house, the shabby school made of boards, the miserable huts piled up along the river. The inhabitants and their village leaders look worried and reluctant to speak; it is clear that they are not thrilled by a visit from the authorities. "One has the impression," as the acting provincial chief has in fact observed regarding the notables' lack of interest in their *đình* and in their village in general, "that these people are now dreaming of other gods." For the inhabitants of Hòa Hảo and many other people, Huỳnh Phú Sổ has replaced the village guardian spirit.[12]

[11] Jean Decoux, *A la barre de l'Indochine* (Paris: Plon, 1949), pp. 234–5.

[12] "Rapport d'inspection de Renou à Châu Đốc," 4–8 June 1943 (ANVN-II TĐBCHNV D1-399) [Center II of the Vietnam National Archives in Hồ Chí Minh City, Government Representatives for Southern Vietnam collection, file D1-399].

As far as Catholicism was concerned, the authorities in the region remained in a posture of benevolent neutrality. As for Buddhism, their objective was to go after the renewal movement which had taken shape during the 1930s by establishing and officially recognizing a dozen or so Buddhist associations which were easier to monitor and to ban if their activities went beyond the parameters of education and the "orthodox" practice of Buddhism. This policy of officially recognizing religious associations and of unifying Buddhism was also applied to the Theravada practiced by the Khmer and by a few Vietnamese who in 1940 had founded the first Vietnamese Theravada Organization.[13]

In tandem with the support given to orthodox Buddhism, the authorities banned the building of new places of worship in the area where Hòa Hảo had appeared, which could become sites for pilgrimage. In September 1943 the Bửu Hương Tự temple (Thành Mỹ Tây village), seen as a center of suspicious activities, was requisitioned in order to house a militia guard post. Hòa Hảo village was under the watchful eyes of a company of Cambodian infantrymen. And the *trần điều* (a reddish cloth symbolizing the representation of Buddha which the faithful would hang above the altar) was the subject of an administrative ban in June 1944.

As for the Japanese, there was occasional interference in local affairs on the grounds of defending religious freedom. Two such instances occurred in Thốt Nốt district of Long Xuyên province in February–March 1944, when the Japanese army overruled the local authorities, whom they accused of "oppression against Huỳnh Phú Sổ's followers." These events were deliberate actions aimed at winning the support of the Hòa Hảo faithful and weakening French sovereignty.

In Cochinchina more than elsewhere pan-Asianism seems to have operated through an attempt to join together all of the religious organizations and link them to the Japanese imperial cult. As proof of this, French sources quote the remarks of a Japanese police officer to the effect that "Cochinchinese accept sacrifices for the sake of religious faith more readily than they do for their patriotic faith, which is weak; that is why the Japanese are working hard to impact the various religious sects politically and if possible to unify them together."[14]

There is anecdotal evidence of an attempt to draw together the Vietnamese and Japanese Catholic communities.[15] Such a plan was much clearer in the case of Buddhism. In the 1920s Japan had in fact seen the emergence of "Buddhism of the Royal Way" (*Kodo Bukkyo* 皇道仏教), whose Japanese missionaries sought to carry out proselytization "in the wake of the army" in the occupied territories.[16]

[13] See Pascal Bourdeaux, "Tìm hiểu việc thành lập Phật giáo Theravada Việt Nam qua một số yếu tố tiểu sử của Lê Văn Giảng (giai đoạn 1883–1940)," *in* Bùi Thế Cường ed., *Khoa học xã hội Nam Bộ, nhìn về lịch sử nhìn vào hiện tại, nhìn ra khu vực* (Hà Nội: Nxb Từ Điển Bách Khoa, 2009), pp. 223–45; and "Note sur la section cochinchinoise de l'Institut Bouddhique; du projet (années 1930) à l'œuvre éphémère (1942–1945)," *Siksacakr*, 12–13 (2013): 62–74.

[14] "Extraits conformes d'un rapport sur les sectes religieuses rédigé par la Police spéciale de l'Indochine" (1944), SHD (Service Historique de la Défense), 10H4166.

[15] "We have learned (from Tokyo) that in order to encourage friendly ties among the Catholics of Greater East Asia, an international Catholic friendship society will be organized in Tokyo on April 29 on the Emperor's birthday, the organization is to be headed by Archbishop Tatsudoi of the Catholic Church of Japan"; *Bulletin de Renseignements*, no. 408 (Forces Françaises Combattantes, 14 avril 1943), Chongqing, 18 May 1943 (CAOM INF 1131).

[16] Brian Victoria, *Le zen en guerre (1868–1945)* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), pp. 139 (*Kodo Bukkyo*) and 118 (proselytization).

This policy was implemented from Tonkin down to Cochinchina beginning in 1943.[17] Then came the idea of a Buddhist congress, "a gathering of Buddhist youth from the countries of Greater East Asia," which was to bring together representatives of every region in Tokyo in July of that year. In Cochinchina the first initiative was an attempt to unite the various religious groups which were fairly well removed from Mahayana orthodoxy as redefined by Japan. Unification into an official Cochinchinese Buddhism was anticipated through Huỳnh Phú Sổ's teachings, and it was as a representative of Cochinchina that Sổ was in a position to become involved with the movement.

Thus Hòa Hảo Buddhism, its founder, and its embryonic community benefited from Japanese good will. Similar religious foundations, the simplification of Buddhist rituals, the prophet's charm and youth—all of these gave reason to hope that his teachings could be absorbed into a united imperial Buddhism and that the self-proclaimed man of merit would accept to become both the representative of Cochinchinese Buddhists and the representative of the Japanese Emperor. The early contacts between the Japanese and this particular Buddhist community must therefore be understood in this context. However, the French sources remain fairly unclear on this issue, and certain aspects can only be clarified by Japanese sources.

Conclusion

This four-year period, then, had a very great impact on Huỳnh Phú Sổ and on the fate of the Buddhist movement which he had begun shortly before the outbreak of war and the Japanese military occupation of Indochina. The most important development of this period was Sổ's time "under protection" in Saigon. There the *Đức Thầy* was to discover a new social, cultural, and political environment. Yet even so he remained in close touch with his home area by issuing messages which continued to nourish millenarian beliefs until the point where he began to raise doubts about the fulfilment of these prophecies, e.g. the Dragon Flower Assembly and the coming of the Maitreya Buddha. This was at the heart of the doctrinal evolution of the "*Đạo Xen*" cult which sought to distance itself from such millenarian logic in order to develop instead a new ethical and social approach derived from Pure Land Buddhism. In the years to come, one of the most difficult battles that Huỳnh Phú Sổ and later his closest followers would have to wage was to gain acceptance for this idea among the Mekong Delta peasants.

It is also interesting to note that during this period the French and Japanese authorities differed significantly in their view of Huỳnh Phú Sổ and the Hòa Hảo Buddhism, partly for political reasons (monitoring Sổ's writings and activities) but also for religious reasons (debates over the secularist values promulgated by the Third Republic and doctrinal similarities between Hòa Hảo and some forms of

[17] "In terms of international Buddhism the Japanese initiatives were no less active and dangerous. Under the pretext of facilitating the unification of Buddhist sects in the various Asian countries, in June 1943 Japan sent a group of Japanese monks through the southern territories; they spent several months in Tonkin, where they carried out propaganda work of a racial and xenophobic nature"; Decoux, *A la barre*, p. 236.

Japanese Buddhism). In a collection of interviews from the late 1960s, Nguyễn Văn Hầu, one of the most important Hòa Hảo writers, described his conversations with Makoto Anabuki, a Japanese diplomat posted to Saigon at that time. While Hòa Hảo Buddhism is firmly rooted in the popular culture of the Mekong Delta, certain of its characteristics show similarities with the *Rissho Kosei Kai*（立正佼成会）branch of Japanese Buddhism.[18] These are certainly paths of inquiry which could be pursued for comparative religious studies of different new religious movements and of lay religious systems in Japan and Vietnam; at the same time, scholars can work on gathering Japanese accounts—written and archival but also oral histories—which would significantly add to our understanding of Hòa Hảo Buddhism and, more broadly, of the evolution of Asian religious practices in the mid-20th century.

(Translation by Bruce M. Lockhart)

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[18] Nguyễn Văn Hầu, *Năm cuộc đối thoại về Phật giáo Hòa Hảo* (Long Xuyên: Nxb Hương Sen, 1972), pp. 135–6.