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THE SOUTHEAST ASIA FORUM
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Jesus, Lenin, and Victor Hugo: The "Outrageous" Syncretism of Caodai Religion in Vietnam and California

Janet Hoskins

2013 Lee Kong Chian Distinguished Fellow, APARC, Stanford University

The Caodai religion is unique. Born in French Indochina in 1926, it mixes Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism with organizational elements from the Catholic Vatican and French spirit-writing practices. It is a masculine monotheism that worships Cao Dai (the Jade Emperor) as the head of an elaborate pantheon of "spiritual advisors" who include, alongside Asian sages, Jesus, Victor Hugo, Vladimir Lenin, and Jeanne d'Arc. The religion emerged in tandem with the Vietnamese struggle for independence as a form of "cultural nationalism" expressed as spiritual revival. Described as both conservative and revolutionary, nostalgic and futuristic, it has been called an "outrageous form of syncretism"—an excessive, even transgressive blending of piety with blasphemy, obeisance with rebellion, the old with the new. It counts some four million followers worldwide and has grown rapidly in the US, with dozens of temples in California. Using the case of Caodaism, Prof. Hoskins will explore the controversial concept of "syncretism" and its application to Asian religions.

Janet Hoskins is a professor of anthropology and religion at the University of Southern California. Her books include *Fragments from Forests and Libraries* (2001); *A Space Between Oneself and Oneself: Anthropology as a Search for the Subject* (1999); *Biographical Objects: How Things Tells the Stories of People's Lives* (1998); and *Headhunting and the Social Imagination in Southeast Asia* (contributing ed., 1996). The Association for Asian Studies awarded its Benda Prize in Southeast Asian Studies to *The Play of Time: Kodi Perspectives on History, Calendars and Exchange* (1993). She has also written and produced three ethnographic documentaries, including "The Left Eye of God: Caodaism Travels from Vietnam to California" (2008).

Wednesday, May 8, 2013, 12:00 - 1:30pm
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