

COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

Dignitary of Cao Dai to speak about young Vietnamese religion

By [Grace Lyden](#)

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COLUMBIA — Joe Hobbs has been recruiting Vietnamese international students to come to Missouri since 2006, but none of MU's 70 Vietnamese students practice Cao Dai.

Cao Dai is a young Vietnamese religion, founded in the southern part of the country in 1926. The religion expanded at first, but it was confined to the south in 1954 when Vietnam split into two countries. Although the nation unified under communist control in 1976, only five to six million people practice Cao Dai in Vietnam today.

"Most people abroad would not know of the Cao Dai, and even a lot of people in Vietnam would not be familiar with them," said Hobbs, the director of MU's Vietnam Institute and chairman of the MU Department of Geography.

Canh Tran, a dignitary of the Cao Dai Holy See in Tay Ninh, Vietnam, will speak about the religion at 4 p.m. Monday in Room 28 Schweitzer Hall at MU.

The religion of Cao Dai takes its primary influences from Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, but the religion is also monotheistic, and Jesus is revered on the same level as the Buddha. Caodaiists believe God created their religion to unify those of the East and West.

"The doctrine of Cao Dai is to embrace all religions," Tran said. "We embrace Islam. We embrace Christianity. We embrace Taoism, Buddhism."

On Sunday, Tran went to Olivet Christian Church and felt totally at home.

"To me, that feels like I go to my temple, that's all," Tran said. "The god is the same god. You have Christ; I have Christ on my altar."

Cao Dai is also a spiritist religion, meaning its members believe in direct messages from God. Formerly, these messages were sent to the highest officials in the religious hierarchy during séances,

but this ritual has been illegal in Vietnam since the south came under the control of the communist government.

Tran worked for Cao Dai for 20 years to become a dignitary and said his position is similar to that of a priest in Catholicism.

"It's very comparable to the structure of the Catholic Church," Hobbs said. "They have a very, very intricate hierarchical system with somebody who is the equivalent of a pope."

Unlike in Catholicism, Cao Dai officials can be married, as Tran is, and women can serve in the same roles as men.

As the director of the Cao Dai Overseas Missionary, Tran has visited universities in the United States, Canada, Bangladesh and Austria, but said his job is not to convert students.

"We have a message from God that says religion is not merchandise where you can go and sell it," Tran said. "It's not that way. It comes from your heart."

When students tell Tran they want to join, he actually discourages them and tells them to study its beliefs before they decide.

The Asian Affairs Student Association and the Vietnam Institute are sponsoring Tran's lecture on Monday. The event is free and open to the public.

Supervising editor is [John Schneller](#).