

HMong People Interact with Christianity

By Kou Seying

Although HMong people have been in America for two decades, it is often asked, “Who are the HMong people?” and “Why are they here?” This essay will examine the HMong people through references to their traditional worldview and beliefs. Included in this explanation is a statement describing why they are here in America. The first purpose of this essay is to present a basic understanding of the HMong people. The second purpose is to determine how Christianity can interact with the HMong culture and religion.

The most widely accepted meaning among HMong scholars for the word “HMong” is “free” or “free people.” The HMong people live throughout the world. They are a nation of people without an original country of their own who have a distinct culture and language. There are approximately 300,000 in the United States. 125,000 entered this country from refugee camps in Thailand.¹ The earliest possible documentation of the HMong people dates from 2679 B.C. in Chinese annals.² Several millions still live in the southern provinces of China today. In the mid-1800s, some of them migrated to Southeast Asia where they settled in Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar (Burma), and Laos.

During the Vietnam War, HMong men were recruited by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to fight the “Other Theater” of the war.³ This part of the war was fought in the country of Laos. It was very much a secret war and a civil war. The secret army of the CIA

¹ Ben Barber, “U.S. HMong: unsettled, unaccepted, uncertain,” and “HMong People Overlooked, Forgotten,” *The Washington Times*, December 1-5, 1997.

² Robert Cooper, ed., *The HMong* (Bangkok: Artasia Press Co. Ltd., 1995), 5.

primarily consisted of HMong soldiers. One of its top priority roles was to contain the Ho Chi Minh Trail.⁴ General Vang Pao estimated that 35,000 HMong men were killed in the war. Compared to the 58,000 American soldiers who died in Vietnam, it is astounding.⁵ When the war ended in 1975, many HMong fled to neighboring Thailand. Because of their involvement with the U.S. government, they became prime targets for the communist regime to destroy. Many eventually resettled in the U.S. and other parts of the world including Australia, Europe, and South America.

Today there are several large HMong communities throughout the U.S. The largest concentrated community is the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area with an estimated HMong population of more than 60,000.⁶ In the St. Paul Public Schools District, nearly 25 percent of the students are HMong.⁷ Other large communities are in Wisconsin, California, Colorado, and Georgia.

There are two primary dialects (Blue and White) spoken among the HMong people in the U.S. The traditional religion of the HMong is Animism or tribal religion with a strong

³ Christopher Robbins, *The Ravens* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1995), 1.

⁴ The Ho Chi Minh Trail was the main supply line for the North Vietnamese into South Vietnam where a portion was inside Laos. Much of the effort was poured into cutting off this supply line.

⁵ General Vang Pao was a HMong general in the Military Region Two who led the HMong army into being a world-renowned fighting force under the CIA operation in Laos. He gave these figures in a speech on May 8, 1997 at a seminar sponsored by Liberty State Bank in St. Paul. Today he continues to play a leadership role among many of the HMong in America.

⁶ Barber, *The Washington Times*.

⁷ Saint Paul Public Schools Annual Report 1995-96, 3.

emphasis on adherence to the spirits, *henotheism*.⁸ The following is a brief description of HMong beliefs and worldview.

The HMong concept of time is vastly different from that of the western linear view. It is a circular view suggesting that various ages repeat themselves cyclically with no final goal. There is no purpose to history in the sense that Westerners typically understand by the term "history."

The powers of nature -- called spirits -- are terrifying and mysterious. There is very little distinction between the physical and spiritual realm. Cultural anthropologists conclude, "The HMong believe in a variety of natural ancestral, and supernatural spirits, which live in and animate all things."⁹ It is the duty of humans to make peace with (propitiate) the spirits, the terrifying and mysterious powers of nature. There is no divine guidance in the human appeasement act. It relies solely upon the ability of humans, especially through the shaman (priest or priestess), to manipulate the spiritual realm. The spirits of those who have died still communicate with this world, in this belief.

The HMong people believe that there are many spirits, but it is important to have a close adherence to a certain spirit usually connected in some ways with the spirits of ancestors (*ib tug dlaab ib tug qhua*). It has tremendous social implications. The closeness of the relation is determined by the adherence to a certain spirit. When this has been determined by any two individuals, then the emphatic phrase *koj tuag tau huv kuv tsev kuv tuag tau huv*

⁸ Henotheism is a religious practice that has close adherence to a certain god (spirit) while recognizing the existence of others. See *The Spirit of Truth and The Spirit of Error*, compiled by Steven Cory (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986).

⁹ Cooper, p. 54.

koj tsev could be exclaimed, which says, "I may die in your house and you may die in my house." This is to show the ultimate relationship of families. Otherwise, it would be of great offense to the spirits to die in the house that adheres to a different spirit.

The Chinese have a strong influence on the HMong traditional religion and worldview. The HMong concept of the otherworld is paralleled to that of the Chinese in terms of *yin* and *yang*, "the dark world of spirits . . . and the bright world of men and women, of material objects and nature" respectively.¹⁰ This otherworld is not defined clearly. There is no specific description of this world. It is referred to as the place of ancestors. The funeral rites are preparations for sending the spirit/soul of the dead to the ancestors, as indicated by the funeral songs.¹¹ The otherworld is where the soul will dwell until s/he reincarnates. The belief of how a soul may or may not reincarnate varies. Numerous explanations are given as to how this may take place. However, the basic concept of reincarnation or rebirth in the HMong traditional beliefs is consistent.

By tradition, the HMong people structure around the concept of clan and community. The communal aspect of society dictates that the survival of the group is of paramount importance. The existence of an individual is defined through the relationship to the clan and community. An individual who lives outside of the communal structure traditionally cannot

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *Kab Ke Pam Tuag: Les Funerailles. Chants et Recitatifs*, (France Guyane: Association Communautaire HMong, 1986) p. 19.

survive because there is no identity. All actions have to be for the common good of the group to ensure its survival.¹²

Most often power -- rather than justice, love, or mercy -- has characterized the object of worship or sacred rites. This occurs usually through the shaman, who performs rituals to communicate with the world of spirits. Sometimes, the shaman enters a state of trance to participate in the life of the spirits for a short time. Often it is believed that power is attained through this practice of shamanism. Remedies will come out of this process, determining the cause and effect of a given situation or desire.

In the HMong worldview, there is no escape from human problems. Whether the problems be personal, social, political, or spiritual, the state of grace cannot be reached in any final way. There will always be new problems. Blood sacrifices of animals are the usual means of atonement in the sense that they appeases the anger of the spirits. Material favors also can be gained from sacrifices.¹³ Many resources are used for these various rituals and sacrifices throughout the year. Animistic or traditional rituals and sacrifices are offered in many occasions from birth to death, from marriage to New Year celebration, and so on.

There is no aspect of a traditional HMong life that can be separated from the spiritual realm. The weight felt by HMong people of bondage of the terrifying and mysterious spirits finally led to the overwhelming success of the mission in Laos. Freedom from the spirits and

¹² This notion of placing the emphasis on the group or family rather than the autonomous individual is a challenge for many young HMong people in America. However, throughout history, the HMong people have been able to maintain their language and culture well without major influence from their host countries. It is the case today in the U.S. where significant communities exist. In one sense, the HMong people have been able to preserve the culture and language better than in any other part of the world because of religious and economic freedom in America.

freedom in Christ! Faith in Christ means that the spirits are cast away; the old tradition has been replaced by the new.

1

Finding Common Ground

David J. Bosch's statement is descriptive of the HMong community today:

One only has to read the several volumes of Ernesto Cardenal's *The Gospel in Slentiname* to discover that the socio-political circumstances of the Nicaraguan peasants who made up Cardenal's basic Christian community were closer to the context of the early church than the situation of many Christians in the West is to that of the early church.¹⁴

Bosch goes on to say that this may be true of some indigenous African independent churches and the house churches of Mainland China. Adding the HMong community to this list would not be difficult at all.

In New Testament times, as Wayne Meeks states, "The human world is seen as under the control of demonic powers."¹⁵ Jerome Neyrey points to this fact as well, writing: "Luke's worldview lies heavily under the influence of spirits, demons, and the like."¹⁶ This is in opposition to the power of God. The traditional language Paul adapts in his epistles is very

¹³ *The Spirit of Truth and The Spirit of Error*.

¹⁴ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), 23.

¹⁵ Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) p. 184.

¹⁶ Jerome H. Neyrey, ed., *The Social World of Luke-Acts* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrikson Publishers, Inc., 1991), 196.

fitting for the HMong context. For example, he speaks about rescue from bondage and from "the coming wrath" (I Thess. 1:10; cf. 5:9; Rom. 5:9; Eph. 2:3). Being Christians meant that they have been transferred into a different sphere of power, in which the virtues are "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22). This is understandable language for HMong people. When Wayne Meeks talks about the New Testament era being "a cosmic dimension, a mythical picture of spiritual powers at war with one another and with God,"¹⁷ it seems that he speaks directly to HMong cosmic world as well. This concept of transferring of power is very concrete for HMong converts.

An important contribution from Mary Douglas is the recognition of communal bonds in relation to ritual. She states, "when the social group grips its member in tight communal bonds, the religion is ritualist; when this grip is relaxed, ritualism declines."¹⁸ The HMong traditional animistic religion is highly ritualistic. As Douglas points out, this is due to the fact that the communal bonds are strong.

From a biblical point of view, the concept of ritual need not be abandoned for an animist who becomes a Christian. The church is full of rituals. Again, from a basic anthropological view, baptism, Eucharist (the Lord's Supper), worship, and casting away the spirits (pre-baptismal rite/exorcism) are the rituals of the church. If this ritualistic view is maintained, the communal bonds need not be severed once the people change their allegiance to Christ, namely, become Christians. This has been demonstrated clearly in the practices of the early church. Specifically, being a HMong Lutheran Christian today provides a happy medium.

¹⁷ Meeks, p. 187.

S/he is not in the realm of Satan. Yet, at the same time, the ritualistic/spiritual notion of life is not destroyed. Ritual and power cannot be separated. Changing the orb of power (Col. 2:20) requires ritualization or initiation. Robert Ellwood states, “Ritual generates order in place of chaos and nurtures ‘rectification of names’.”¹⁹

The HMong cosmic reality and that of the early church, up to and including Luther's time, are not very different. The difficulty today in the Western world is, as Neil T. Anderson describes, seeing reality only in two tiers. The following figure is illustrative:

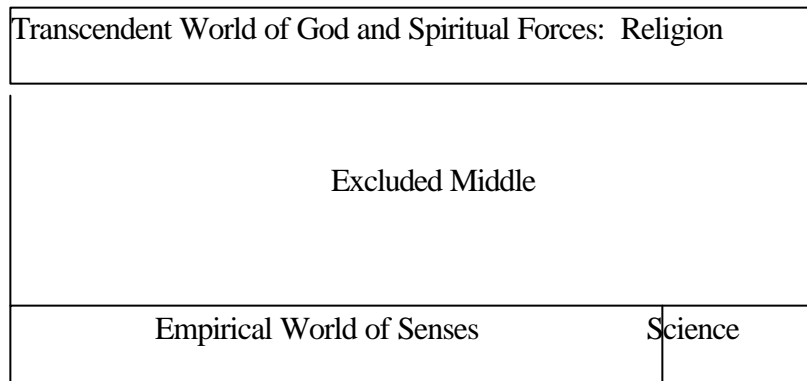


Figure 1²⁰

Paul Hiebert refers to the area between the two tiers as the "excluded middle," the real world of spiritual forces active on earth. Spiritual warfare is a reality for the HMong context, as it was for the early church. Anderson writes, "The excluded middle is only excluded in our secularized minds, not in reality."²¹ In the traditional HMong worldview, religious practice or the so-called

¹⁸ Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 13.

¹⁹ Robert S. Ellwood, *Many Peoples Many Faiths*, 5th Edition (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1996), 169.

²⁰ Adapted from Neil T. Anderson, *The Bondage Breaker* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1990), 29.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

superstition has more practical relevance to daily life than science has. This reflects the biblical reality more than the modern westerners whose tendency is to dismiss this worldview.

However, people have lived in and experienced the Far East or other non-western countries (expatriate missionaries would be one example) know their worldviews no longer exclude the excluded middle. Other examples are those American pilots who flew in the Vietnam War, particularly those who fought secretly in Laos.²²

A helpful parallel for the HMong worldview is the discussion by Malina and Neyrey. Their evaluation of the ancient personality could not have described the HMong worldview better:

The importance given here to horizontal relationships will express itself in concern for kinship relations, knowing who is one's neighbor, the common good of the in-group, and love for that in-group neighbor . . . In the world of Paul, we find many values consequent to the primary value of collateral relations. Things are valued by Paul precisely insofar as they "build up" the group rather than the individual at the group's expense.²³

Conversion must be seen as not destroying the "common good" of neighbors. The greatest fear for HMong people is not so much of changing "religion", but the possibility of abandoning the people. HMong have an expression that captures this sense, *lawb dlaab tsi xob lawb neej*, literally "cast away the spirits [but] do not cast away the people."

This concept of the "common good" for the people is closely related to the concept of family. Roland de Vaux describes the family in ancient Israel this way:

²² Robbins, p. 261.

²³ Bruce J Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul: An Archaeology of Ancient Personality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996) p. 196.

In the normal type of Israelite marriage the husband is the “master”, the *ba 'al*, of his wife. The father had absolute authority over his children, even over his married sons if they lived with him, and over their wives . . . The family consists of those who are united by common blood and common dwelling-place. The “family” is a “house”; to found a family is “to build a house” (Ne. 7:4).²⁴

This is strikingly similar to the HMong concept. By simply replacing "Israelite" with "HMong" would be more than sufficient for a description of the HMong context. The word for "family" in HMong is *tsev neeg* literally, "house people". The common expression for "the same family" is *ib tsev neeg*, literally "one house people."²⁵

²⁴ Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel. Its Life and Institutions*, trans. by John McHugh (Grand Rapid: William B. Ferdinans Publishing Company, 1997) p.20.

²⁵ Cooper, 9.

2

Areas of Tension

In a country where Christianity made first contact among the HMong people, no external factor apparently influenced casting away the spirits. It would be difficult to explain the overwhelming success of the mission work among the HMong people of Laos – namely, casting away the spirits – by any such external factors. Humanly speaking, people do not usually just discard ancient religious practices that have been in place for generations. It is nearly impossible to even begin accounting for this result unless it is viewed in its totality, including what may be presupposed.

Wayne Meeks notes that the radical change of conversion “presupposes some kinds of strong prior dissatisfaction with the way things are.”²⁶ This statement is very important for the HMong context today. Recall that HMong people labor under a terrible weight of bondage to various spirits. For them, all problems have spiritual as well as physical ramifications. Still, Christianity is almost never the first choice for solving their problems. Usually, when all the animistic rituals have been attempted, then they might consider approaching the church or approaching representatives of other religions such as Buddhism to overcome the power of evil. Evil may take many different forms: pain, sickness, death, demon-possession, personal sin, immorality, etc. As evil was experienced as something very real and tangible in the ancient world, the HMong worldview today identifies with this experience. It is no surprise that the apostles used "religious" words to show what Jesus did in the face of sickness, demon-

²⁶ Meeks, 184.

possession, and exploitation such as "to save" and give "forgiveness."²⁷ In fact, when trying to understand the HMong context of conversion to Christianity, it is often best to draw parallels from ancient Biblical contexts.

From an anthropological perspective, Mary Douglas makes acute observations about the HMong people today. The following statement is particularly important. It gives a good synopsis of the HMong context today especially in America:

The main disadvantage of the enclave is that it is prone to internal factions which eventually lead to splitting. It is well-devised for protest but poorly devised for exercise of power. Another disadvantage is its tendency to cherish irreconcilable enmities and to see moral issues in rigid black and white. Note also the enclave's weakness in negotiation, its inability to delegate, its administrative muddle, and its difficulty in assuring support for long-term policies. All of this applies to dissenting minorities whether they are religious or secular. The main focus of enclave organization is the integrity of its borders -- a polite way of saying that it is very concerned that its members should not defect or run away.²⁸

This describes the social context in which HMong people live, whether in reference to converting to Christianity or simply the cultural tensions today.

Honor and shame are important elements of the HMong context, as in the New Testament and the early church. Chapter two of Neyrey's *The Social World of Luke-Acts* clearly reflects this point. The existential reality of the HMong world is similar to this first-century world. Evaluation of the individual/family is in terms of honor and shame. Included in this assessment are the gender issues where a man is judged according to his honor or a woman

²⁷ Bosch, pp. 32-33.

²⁸ Douglas, pp. xxi-xxii.

according to shame or the lack of shame. In addition, problems, conflicts and all other aspects of life are viewed through the lens of honor and shame, which provide the means for evaluation.²⁹

More often than not, becoming Christians for HMong involves a power encounter as with other animistic contexts. The Willowbank report confirms this point:

Conversion involves a power encounter. People give their allegiance to Christ when they see that his power is superior to magic and voodoo, the curses and blessings of witch doctors, and the malevolence of evil spirits, and that his salvation is a real liberation from the power of evil and death.³⁰

In this paradigm, the forces of Jesus are in competition with the forces of Satan. "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work" (1 John 3:8). The devil's work among the HMong people is their adherence to the spirits. Christ had come to cast away the spirits and He is casting away the spirits today. This was done at the cross. St. Paul writes that He "disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Col. 2:15). In conversion from the power encounter perspective, it is the turning "from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God" (Acts 26:18).

This spiritual encounter requires a complete shift of the ultimate allegiance in the human heart. It is clear, as the book of Joshua points out, that it requires throwing away the foreign gods. It was demonstrated publicly through the setting up of a stone at Shechem to be a reminder, witness, to the allegiance to God. The burning of magical literature in Acts 19:18-19 was an act of casting away the spirits. The sacred paraphernalia were cast into the fire to be

²⁹ Neyrey, pp. 25-66.

³⁰ John R.W. Stott and Robert Coote, eds., *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) p.327.

destroyed forever. In HMong epistemology, it means that the old liver (heart) has been replaced by the new. Acts 19:20 concludes that "In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power."

This new life, as the result of this change of the liver (heart), more often than not demonstrates a form of dramatic encounter showing that the old way no longer has power over the new converts. This new life is to be the people of God or the person of God, as St. Paul writes, "But you, man of God, flee from all this [evil], and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness (1 Tim. 6:11)." He continues in, "so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2 Tim. 3:17)

For the HMong, the Christian faith means outwardly that their animistic paraphernalia are destroyed. This parallels the setting up the stone of witness in the days of Joshua. It also parallels the Ephesian magicians burning their books. These accounts were not individualistic in nature. They were symbolic in a way, showing a community strengthening each other in the new life in Christ. As the psalmist says, "Let the redeemed of the Lord say this — those he redeemed from the hand of the foe" (Ps. 107:2).

3

Areas of Most Difficulty

Syncretism is prevalent among the HMong people, as anthropologists illustrate. “Often, however, even HMong Christians retain considerable faith in their traditional beliefs, particularly in shamans, and may consult shamans and also attend Christian services.”³¹ The reverse of this practice is also true where HMong animists turn to Christianity for external efficacy while maintaining their traditional beliefs and practices. This is one of the greatest challenges in reaching out to the HMong people. Paul writes to the Corinthians who had this problem, "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons (1 Cor. 10:21)."

In this sense, conversion means moving from the manipulation of the power of the spirits to the sovereignty of God. In other words, there is a shift from the orb of Satan to the orb of God. The difference is that God's power cannot be manipulated. God's power is superior, as the Gospel of Luke also illustrates (in chapter 11:14ff). This same shift is clearly demonstrated in 1 Kings 18. The prophets of Baal were trying to manipulate power. This is the animistic nature of their act. It is this shift from manipulation of power to worshipping the sovereign God that Elijah finally showed the people. In the same way today, the HMong are coming from the manipulation of spirit power to worshipping the sovereign God.

³¹ Cooper, 71.

The concept of deity or god exists in HMong traditional beliefs. However, in their beliefs this god has become distant and uninterested in human affairs.³² The Christian message fills many voids that are left by the HMong traditional beliefs. Their notion of separation from the high god or Supreme Being who was the creator of all things is answered through Jesus Christ. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ have again established the bridge to God. This bridge to God needs no magical power. The power of God through Christ has overcome all magical power of Satan through manipulation of spiritual power.³³

HMong people understand the concept of sacrifice. Jesus Christ, as the one perfect Sacrifice, replaces all traditional practices that required such constant sacrifices that there was no end in sight. The Christian faith can point to the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus as the only one necessary to overcome all evil spiritual forces including death. Through the one true Holy Spirit, Jesus is always with His believers to bring His sacrifice's blessing.

HMong believe that death is not the end. The soul or spirit lives on apart from the body. Yet, their otherworld cannot be defined with any certainty. The good news of Jesus Christ gives hope to an otherworld that need not be feared. This otherworld is a blessed place for those who believed in Jesus in this world. Being with Him "in heaven," there is no need to fear the uncertainty of reincarnation. He will at the last day raise up all the dead, and His people will live with Him in His resurrection victory. There is no longer need for manipulation of spiritual powers. Eternal life is the gift from Christ, without any payment on the part of humans

³² Ibid., p. 54-57.

³³ Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991) p. 218.

(Ephesians 2:8-9). It is not magic that rules but rather the miracles of water, and of bread and wine with the Word -- Jesus Christ, in the daily lives of Christians internally for eternity.