

HOW THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CAN FREE SOMEONE FROM THE FEAR THAT  
COMES WITH THE TRADITIONAL HMONG RELIGION

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A Senior Thesis Submitted to  
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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the traditional Hmong religion and the effect that it has on the Hmong people. By examining the Hmong religion, this thesis will show that the Hmong religion is currently holding the Hmong people in fear and away from the true God. Satan uses the various aspects of the Hmong religion, Shamanism and ancestor worship, to make this happen. Then, this thesis will look to Scriptures to find the Biblical answer to the Hmong religion and the fear it brings. Finally, this thesis will give the Christian response to the Hmong religion and how the gospel can free someone from the fear that comes with it.

To reach my conclusions, I read various books and journal articles. To hear about the topic from a Christian Hmong point of view, I turned to various Hmong pastors of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Their knowledge and outreach experience to the Hmong helped this thesis present the negative side of the Hmong religion and how to communicate Jesus in a meaningful way.

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## **Introduction**

My vicar year in Wausau, Wisconsin was full of excitement and surprises. But there is one Sunday I will never forget. After church, my Sundays usually consisted of catching up with the members in the fellowship hall. If there were visitors, I would go and introduce myself and get to know them. This was a usual Sunday for me. On this particular Sunday, however, something happened that was out of the ordinary. As I was getting up to leave, I turned and looked down the hallway toward the conference rooms. There I saw a very unique group of people, a people that would interest me greatly. The group of people I saw was a group of Hmong people. As they were leaving, I saw the smiles on their faces as they said hello to me. They were some of the nicest people I had ever met. Pastor Yang, the pastor in charge of Hmong outreach in the Wausau area, told me they were here because they needed a place to hold their clan meeting. I could not help but wonder why they came to sit in our conference room but not our pews? That question interested me, but I did not realize how complex the answer really was.

With that question in mind, I talked to Pastor Yang and I asked him why they were at church but not at worship. He told me he let them use the church because he knew it would be a great experience for them to be exposed to a place where Christians come to worship their Lord and encourage fellow believers. Pastor Yang understood that the Hmong people are in desperate need of the gospel. They needed the gospel and the news of their Savior because the traditional Hmong religion is keeping them from the true God.

After getting a taste of the Hmong culture during my vicar year my heart was really touched. I became friends with Hmong families who have impacted my life for the better. They have led me to see that there is a world outside of the Anglo culture. This is a world I want to explore and is what led me to choose the Hmong and their religion as my thesis topic. In my paper, I will give a brief history of the Hmong and why they are in America today. I will then discuss the Hmong religion and how Satan is using it to breed fear while keeping them away from the comfort of the gospel. After this, I will use Scriptures to respond to the Hmong religion and find out what God has to say about it. This will put their religion in the proper perspective. Finally, I will take a look at what I can do as an Anglo Christian and future pastor in reaching the Hmong. I will attempt to find the best possible way or ways to bring them the good news about Christ.

For my thesis I read books, articles, and interviewed many Hmong pastors. Since I have such limited experience with the Hmong culture, I used them to help broaden my understanding. In my paper, I will be using their knowledge on the Hmong religion. I will also be using their experiences

and knowledge to help find the best ways to reach the Hmong with the gospel. To add support for this paper, I turned to a Hmong family, who is now Christian and so they provided me with a very unique perspective. I now present to you my senior thesis “How the gospel of Jesus can free someone from the fear that comes with the traditional Hmong religion.”

## **What Got Me Started**

For my vicar year I was called to Mountain of the Lord in Wausau, Wisconsin. After I received the call, I met with the congregation’s staff minister to provide a detailed summary of my call. One of the side things I would be doing dealt with Hmong ministry. Right then and there I became nervous and wondered how I would be able to help. The limited outreach I have done was mostly targeting white Anglo Americans who I already had relationships with. I knew Hmong ministry would be very different.

In Wausau, Wisconsin there is a growing Hmong population. The churches in that area have recognized the need to reach out to the Hmong community. This led to the calling of a Hmong pastor through Mountain of the Lord. The weekend I was installed, the Hmong pastor was also ordained. This was a big deal for him and his family. When Hmong people celebrate something, they go all out. A common feature of their celebration is food. Preparation for the feast meant going to a farm to get the meat and I had the opportunity to be a part of this. The Hmong are very family orientated so when I arrived at the farm, I met the Hmong pastor's entire family. After slaughtering the cow, the family went to work. Each member of his family had a job to do and they did it well. They butchered their cow faster than I thought possible and loaded the meat in the back of the trucks and headed home. At his house, I observed the preparation for the meal. The men were in the garage cleaning the meat, the women were on the porch making egg rolls, and the rest were in the kitchen preparing the vegetables. It was something I had never witnessed before. After eating the meal and spending the entire day with Pastor Yang's family, I was left wanting to know more about the Hmong culture.

Each month during my vicar year, my bishop and I preached a sermon series. During certain months we would revolve the sermon series around popular topics and themes for that month. In December we molded it around Christmas, February focused on love due to Valentine’s Day, and May we echoed the beautiful truths of Easter. But in October, however, we preached a very unique sermon series and because of Halloween we gave it the title “And Other Dark Things”. This sermon series dealt with the subjects of Wicca, the paranormal, and the darkest thing of all, unbelief. Pastor Yang

was asked to preach on the religion of his people and the theme of his sermon was "Hmong Religion: Slavery to Fear". He preached on Shamanism and ancestor worship. He discussed how these were dark things and the negative effect they have on the Hmong people. When we think of religion, we think of something that is to be comforting, but with Hmong religion, that is not the case. Instead of comfort, they are left with fear. Instead of a Savior, they are left with uncertainty.

After listening to that sermon, I was disturbed. I felt sad for the Hmong people who hold so fast to this religion. My heart hurt knowing that their religion leaves out Jesus and the hope he offers. It left me feeling like something needed to be done. It also comforted me to know that the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) recognized the need to reach the Hmong people by calling a Hmong pastor to the Wausau area. Sitting in church, I realized I had the start for my senior thesis. I wanted to learn more about these people and what they really believe.

The Lord has a plan for all of us, but sometimes his plans surprise us. Working with Pastor Yang was one of those surprises. I never thought I would have the opportunity to experience cross cultural evangelism; during my time at Mountain of the Lord I was able to work with Pastor Yang and see evangelism to the Hmong first hand. Being a friend and colleague of Pastor Yang, allowed me to gather early research for my paper. Getting closer to Pastor Yang and being partners of the gospel with him has given me the drive and motivation to reach the Hmong.

## **A Brief History**

### **Where do the Hmong come from?**

Like other cultures, understanding the Hmong as a people is essential when making a plan for evangelism. For me, however, this has been difficult. It is difficult to understand Hmong history because they do not have written records. Through my research, I have realized that there are not many books written on their history. Their history has been pieced together from folktales and various oral traditions. "More accurate and detailed accounts of the history in the last several centuries have been made possible because of the research and literary works of emerging scholars in China and the United States." <sup>1</sup>

Where do the Hmong come from? Their history relies on oral tradition and folktales, so I

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<sup>1</sup> Ya Po Cha . *An Introduction to Hmong culture*. Jefferson, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2010).

have found this to be a difficult question to answer. Some say the Hmong come from China while others say Laos or Thailand. I began my research by looking at their roots in China. Here the first firm historical accounts of the Hmong are found. “For nearly 5,000 years, Hmong have lived in the shadows of imperial China.”<sup>2</sup> In China the Hmong held to a nomadic lifestyle. They were primarily agrarian and loved working in the fields and living off of the land. However, their time in China was not easy. They wanted peace, but that was something they would see little of. “Many wars and uprisings were noted in early centuries. In response, the Hmong began constant movement within China to maintain freedom and preserve their culture. Some Chinese Dynasties welcomed the Hmong; most tried to enslave them.”<sup>3</sup>

Despite war, the Hmong were able to establish their own kingdom throughout the years 400-900. “A Hmong Kingdom was established in China with a hereditary monarchy. The kingdom included very organized villages and districts. Only the rulers and men voted. The Hmong were involved in Chinese rule until they were defeated by the Sung dynasty. They then returned to their nomadic existence.”<sup>4</sup> After their defeat by the Sung dynasty<sup>5</sup>, the Hmong were forced to return to the lives they once knew in China. They were left without a kingdom of their own. The Hmong were yearning to form their own identity, an identity apart from the Chinese rule that was trying to hold them down.

In the 900’s to the 1800’s, the Hmong people continued to move around China. They found themselves in many different locations fighting for the peace and independence they desired. In time, the Hmong desire for peace led them to the land of Laos. In the early 1800’s, the Hmong migrated from parts of China to their new home. “The Hmong were lured to northern Laos by rich, fertile land and the promise of freedom in the seclusion of the Laotian mountains. Ten villages were established in a few years.”<sup>6</sup> In Laos, the Hmong found friendly relations with neighboring people instead of war. They could now return to their agrarian lifestyle and farm the rich land of their new home. The Hmong now felt safe in the secluded mountains of Laos.

### **Where are they now?**

One of the most important periods of migration for the Hmong started in the nineteenth century.

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<sup>2</sup> Ya Po Cha. Jefferson, *An Introduction to Hmong culture*.

<sup>3</sup> *History of the Hmong – A Timeline* (1997 Lao Family Community of Minnesota Inc. Hmong Cultural Training); available from [http://www.laofamily.org/sites/laofamily.org/files/Hmong\\_History.pdf](http://www.laofamily.org/sites/laofamily.org/files/Hmong_History.pdf); Internet

<sup>4</sup> *History of the Hmong – A Timeline* [http://www.laofamily.org/sites/laofamily.org/files/Hmong\\_History.pdf](http://www.laofamily.org/sites/laofamily.org/files/Hmong_History.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> The Song dynasty was a ruling dynasty between the years 960-1279 in China.

<sup>6</sup> *History of the Hmong – A Timeline* (1997 Lao Family Community of Minnesota Inc. Hmong Cultural Training); available from [http://www.laofamily.org/sites/laofamily.org/files/Hmong\\_History.pdf](http://www.laofamily.org/sites/laofamily.org/files/Hmong_History.pdf); Internet



Their migration led them to Southeast Asia, Laos and Vietnam, where many of them still live today. "Members of this tribal culture have lived in the highlands of Southeast Asia, mainly Laos, since the 1800's." <sup>7</sup> This continued into the early nineteen hundreds. When they arrived at their new home, they continued the way of life that they had known for so long. They farmed and lived off the land. Since the land was most uninhabited, they could have a fresh start and lead independent lives. "Hmong continued their self-subsistence farming way of life and worshiped their ancestors as well as the spirits of the land and Heaven." <sup>8</sup>

When we look at our lives here in America, we think of peace. As Christians we are blessed to live in a free country. We are able to feel a sense of safety because our physical needs are met. We are blessed with the religious freedom allowing us to worship the true God. This same freedom that is so important to us is what the Hmong desired for so long.

In the 1900's, however, things would change. The Hmong's peace and security would be threatened by war.

"In the late 1950's, southeast Asia, including Laos, was viewed as an important region to the West. With the fall of China to communism and the rise of Communist rebellion in Vietnam, the US sent elite soldiers, the Green Berets, to train Hmong guerrillas to oppose the Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao communists of Laos. Though the Hmong had no desire to play political roles for other nations, they loved freedom and know that there would be little freedom under Communism. There were threatened by the intrusion of North Vietnamese troops into Laos, so the U.S. then encouraged them to fight and provide training and weapons. With CIA assistance, General Vang Pao became the leader of a secret army of 9,000 Hmong men in 1961. Laos was officially neutral as the Vietnam War broke out, and the US had signed an international agreement, the Geneva Accords, intended to keep Laos neutral and prevent fighting there. In reality, this agreement gave the Communists the upper hand, for they flagrantly violated the agreement. Responding to the presence of active North Vietnamese troops in Laos, the US tried to oppose them without appearing to violate the Geneva Accords by secretly recruiting freedom-loving locals to fight the Communist - - and these freedom-loving locals were the Hmong." <sup>9</sup>

The Hmong involvement in this war with the United States bred a sense of trust. The Hmong thought that the United States would always be there to protect them from their enemies. But as it turns out, their trust was misplaced.

Throughout the Vietnam War, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had increased the number of Hmong soldiers. It was becoming very dangerous for them. During the battles, many Hmong soldiers were dying. They were dying to protect not only themselves but also the soldiers of the United

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<sup>7</sup> Linda L. Barnes ed., and Susan S. Sered ed., *Religion and Healing in America*. (Oxford University Press, 2004), 439.

<sup>8</sup> Ya Po Cha. *An Introduction to Hmong culture*. Jefferson, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Jeff Lindsay. "Why are the Hmong in America?" *Future Hmong Magazine*, (June 2002): 14-15.

States. “Sometimes dozens of Hmong would die in order to rescue one American pilot. Over 100 Hmong pilots were recruited and trained by the US, and they ran mission after mission until they were killed. Hmong courage seemed to know no bounds in the fight for freedom. But sadly, much of the fighting seems to have been in vain.”<sup>10</sup>

The Vietnam War came at a high a price. Many American soldiers gave their lives for the war, but it was nothing compared to the lives the Hmong gave. The Hmong soldiers were not the only ones giving their lives, women and children did too. Fighting in this war meant that the Hmong would have to risk everything. They fought for the United States and the Hmong trusted them.

“But in 1973, the U.S. began to pull out of Laos, leaving the Hmong on their own to fight thousands of North Vietnamese troops in Laos. By 1975, Laos had fallen completely into Communist hands, and the lives of all Hmong people who helped fight the Communists were in jeopardy. More than 100,000 Hmong fled to Thai refugee camps. Many would be killed along the way, especially when crossing the Mekong River to get to Thailand. An estimated 30,000 Hmong would be killed by Communist forces while trying to reach Thailand. Over 100,000 Hmong people died as a result of the war, and today nearly every Hmong family in the US has terrible tales of loss and tragedy relating to the war.”<sup>11</sup>

The Hmong gave a lot for the United States. They gave help when needed even if it meant giving their lives, but now the Hmong needed help. They needed safety and protection from the Communist forces. Even though it seemed like the United States had turned their backs on the Hmong, they would realize the Hmong gave a lot for them. The United States would give back.

“The United States, recognizing the sacrifice made by Hmong soldiers to fight for the U.S., began accepting Hmong refugees into the United States in December of 1975. By 1990, about 100,000 refugees had entered the United States. Today approximately 250,000 Hmong are in the U.S., and similar number still live in Laos. Over 5 million Hmong people are in Southern China, also under Communist rule.

There were only two choices for the Hmong: be a victim of genocide, or get help from someone else. This is when the United States stepped up. To make sure the Hmong were protected, the United States evacuated them to their new home.

My time as a vicar in Wausau, Wisconsin led me to realize that there is a large concentration of Hmong people in the Midwest. As someone who has lived in the Midwest my whole life I wondered what caused this. I understood that the Hmong were brought over to the United States, but why did so many settle in the Midwest? For this answer I turned to a Hmong pastor who serves a growing Hmong population in Minnesota. He stated,

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<sup>10</sup> Jeff Lindsay. “Why are the Hmong in America?”

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

“The Hmong settled in the mid-west because of the education, public assistance from the government and job availability. The main purpose I see was that the first relatives or sponsor was the main concern here. If the sponsor lives in MN, for example, he/she will be able to sponsor the Hmong directly to that state. But, when the Hmong came to America, they could like in different states based on where the sponsors have lived but the Hmong have connection with their relatives or Hmong people which encourage them to move to be together as a community. Most Hmong came to MN and WI because of kinship, job, education, government support.”<sup>12</sup>

Even though I was only able to touch on it, Hmong history is very important. It not only helps us learn about their culture, it describes the Hmong’s tragic history and how they arrived in America. It goes back thousands of years to China and can be described as a journey. It was a long journey for safety and freedom that ultimately led a great number of them to America. Now many Hmong live among us. They have settled in our cities and communities and this now provides wonderful opportunities for ministry. We have the chance to get to know them better on a personal level. When that happens, it will be apparent that there is a great need for evangelism. Because of the Hmong religion, they have a great need for their Savior and to hear about his wonderful news.

## **A Religion of Fear**

### **What is their religion?**

Understanding the Hmong religion is not easy. When I spoke with Pastor Yang, he told me it is hard to know everything about the Hmong religion. This is partly because of the oral tradition of their religion. It is sometimes difficult to pass everything down to the next generation when nothing is written down. This can cause different traditions and aspects of Hmong religion to become lost. Research was difficult because not much has been written on the Hmong religion in general. If someone would ask me what my religion is, I can point to the Bible. I can show that person biblical truths written by God through humans. The Christian faith gives me the blessing and opportunity to share what I believe through written word. I have found this to be untrue regarding Hmong religion. The fact that the Hmong people do not follow a Bible, like Christianity, poses a problem. You cannot go to a bookstore and pick up a Hmong book, like the Bible, and read what they believe. This made research difficult. To help answer the question of where Hmong religion originated, I turned to the Hmong pastors of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). One pastor answered my question this way:

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<sup>12</sup> Interview #2 Question 10.

“Many of their religion adapts through different places and ethnic groups. They get this from heaven itself or as they claim. They think they get it from god himself. That god gave it to them, the unknown god even though they cannot say who it exactly is. They point to the heaven or sky and say god gave us this religion to do and perform these things. Especially the role of the shaman, who plays the role of communicating between the living and the dead and the spirit world. They say that god gave it to them. It came from their nomadic group of people who traveled through different land and countries. That adapted it to their religion and culture, from Vietnam to Laos to Thailand. It is a mixture of a lot of things. Like in Buddhism they bow down before Buddha, but they also go to the shaman and ask him to do certain things. They do not have any specific things. They say this is who we are and who we claim to be.”<sup>13</sup>

Another Hmong pastor gave me this answer, “This is what I believe it is, wherever we have lived our religion has adapted from that place. When I look at Hmong religion I see a little part of it from China and Thailand and Laos. And now you come to America it has changed a little bit because you cannot always do what you used to.”<sup>14</sup> From their answers I have come to understand that Hmong religion has adapted over time. It has also adapted due to the various places they have lived. In a way, the Hmong feel that they have been divinely chosen to receive their religion. This gives the religion a very personal feeling and this can also make it difficult for others to become part of their religion.

Before digging into the many aspects of the Hmong religion, I needed to understand what Hmong religion truly means. To explore this, I interviewed a Hmong family. The family I interviewed gave me a unique perspective because they used to be involved with Hmong religion before turning to Christianity. I asked them to give me the best way to describe the Hmong religion and what it consists of. They replied:

"Hmong religion consists of Animism and Shamanism, the belief that a spiritual world coexists with the physical world. There are many spirits that causes illnesses such as ancestral spirits, house spirits, and spirits in the natural world. For example, natural or non-spiritual causes of illness are caused naturally by the environment such as the natural processes of life and aging; spiritual or religious causes of illness are associated with offending one's ancestors, nature, and evil spirits; and other causes of illness are caused by a broad range of things like curses such as wrong doing in which a curse is put on the wrongdoer. Shamans diagnose and treat the causes of illness by performing ritual ceremonies that entail animal sacrifices in order to calm down the various spirits and to cure illnesses. Our interpretation of Hmong religion: The process of worshiping and making sacrifices to one's ancestors in return for protection from evil spirits, good health, and good fortune."<sup>15</sup>

This interview helped me understand that their religion is primarily animistic. In Hmong religion,

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<sup>13</sup> Interview #2, Question 2 For sake of anonymity, I will not be giving the names of the Hmong individuals I interviewed.

<sup>14</sup> Interview #3, Question 3.

<sup>15</sup> Interview #1. Question 1. I interviewed a Hmong family who became members at the church I served during my vicar year. They had previous experience with Hmong religion and are now Christians.

animism leads to Shamanism and ancestor worship; two prime beliefs of their religion.

### **Animism and the Fear it brings**

From my research, I have found animism to be the best way to describe the Hmong religion. To understand what animism entails, it was helpful to look at where the word came from. "The word 'animism' has its roots in three Latin words. Animare – means to vivify; this is the same word from which 'animation' comes. The second and third words are similar in meaning: anima means 'soul', and animus is translated 'spirit'. From this etymology, the most basic definition of the religion is found: to believe that souls or spirits give life to nature." <sup>16</sup> Animism is at the heart of the Hmong religion. Their religion is spiritual. "Animism has to deal with the soul or the spirit. Everything is surrounded by that. As Christians, if we have something wrong, we pray to God. The Hmong do that same. If something happens to you, you can always pray to your ancestor or the person you look up to. But mostly they look up to their elders who pass away." <sup>17</sup> The Hmong believe that the spirit world is at the center of the physical world and all living things have a soul. This is not limited to just people. When I look outside, I see a tree, flowers, and grass. Those who hold to animism believe that all these objects found in nature have a soul. One Hmong pastor had a very interesting story on this subject. He said,

"You can describe the Hmong religion as animism because they believe that souls exist in everything. For example, before my family became Christians (or believed in Christ), my father's name was Neng. But my grandfather renamed him after to a big rock –Xaoze because of his health issues. Xaoze means: big rock will protect you. My grandfather believed that the soul (spirit) of the big rock could protect Neng from his health issues and bless him." <sup>18</sup>

As you can see, the Hmong believe many things have spirits. These things would be classified as lower spirits; however, the higher spirits are much more important. The higher spirits would be any spirit that has given someone life. These spirits would include parents, grandparents, great- grandparents, etc. These spirits lead to another part of their religion known as ancestor worship.

In this spiritual world there is believed to be a god or a supreme being. "Whether it be God, Confucius, Buddha, or Allah, the Hmong religion does hold that there is some supreme being out there. Just like other religions the Hmong religion acknowledges a supreme being who is supernatural." <sup>19</sup> But their definition of God is vastly different from Christianity. They call this divine supernatural

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<sup>16</sup> Kent Mundhenk. "Common Threads of Animism," *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 22 no 1 (2006): 6.

<sup>17</sup> Interview #3, Question 3.

<sup>18</sup> Interview #6, Question 3.

<sup>19</sup> When reading the Hmong sources about this supreme being it reminded me of Acts 17:22-34. In this section of Scriptures Paul arrives at the Areopagus in Athens and finds an altar dedicated to the unknown god. This points to the natural knowledge of God found in the hearts of all mankind.

being Heaven. "The one who holds the ultimate divine power in the Hmong world is Heaven. Its literal translation is 'the sky.' The way Hmong people speak of Heaven is that it is not a being but is more like a place, referred to much like a thing. It is like a place because supernatural beings dwell in it. It is a being in that it can hear, feel, see, and instruct."<sup>20</sup> Christianity's view of heaven is much different. In heaven, Jesus lives and reigns. In heaven, Jesus is working everything out for the good of his church and every believer. Heaven is the place where Christians know they will go when they die, and it is the place where Jesus sits at the right hand of his Father. (Ephesians 1:18-20)<sup>21</sup> This is what gives Christians comfort when days are dark.

The Hmong belief of Heaven is not so comforting. Heaven includes everything beyond what can be seen. It will carry out its will, however, any way it wants. Heaven has authority over both the natural and spiritual worlds. It controls both good and evil. With their concept of "Heaven", we quickly arrive at how their animistic beliefs breed fear. Although Heaven is something believed to be righteous, it is not something that they actually worship. "Heaven is virtuous, righteous, and impartial yet it is not something Hmong people worship. Hmong either respect it or fear it. Its unscriptural divine rules are to be followed strictly. Violators will face swift and stiff punishments."<sup>22</sup> Heaven causes fear. Through research, there was nothing about forgiveness within the Hmong religion. Instead, there was punishment. The evil doer is destined to find swift punishment from heaven. The Hmong person has to tread lightly making sure that he or she does not step on Heaven's toes or break one of its divine rules<sup>23</sup>. People who keep these divine rules are respectful of heaven while the person who breaks them is afraid that Heaven might bring powerful punishment.

When it comes to this spiritual realm, I could not help but wonder if they believe in a savior. As stated, the Hmong concept of heaven greatly deals with punishment. Fear of breaking the divine rules weighs heavily on the hearts of the followers of Hmong religion. As a Christian, I too believe in the divine rules called the Ten Commandments. I know God commands me to keep them but as a sinner I cannot. God knows this better than I do. He knows that because of my sinful nature I daily fail. Because of this, I deserve punishment. I deserve the fires of hell. But God loves me too much to let that happen. Therefore, God sent his Son to take that punishment for me. There, on the cross of Good

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<sup>20</sup> Ya Po Cha. *An Introduction to Hmong culture*. Jefferson, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> "I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms."

<sup>22</sup> Ya Po Cha. *An Introduction to Hmong culture*. Jefferson, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> The Hmong follow a system of divine law similar to the ten commandments. This divine law is very extensive and more ethical than spiritual.

Friday, Jesus died for my sins. He took the punishment I deserve. Now I have heaven waiting for me at the end of my life. This is why I can call Jesus my Savior. With this in mind, I asked the Hmong pastors if the Hmong religion believes in someone saving them from punishment and their wrong doings. One Hmong pastor answered my question this way: "Hmong people have no Savior. Hmong people believe that during our time on earth if you want good things to happen to you, you do good things -Karma. Hmong people believe that there is a God that watches over all. To have a Savior like Christ that died on the cross to take away the sins of the world, No." <sup>24</sup> Another Hmong pastor told me this, "No! The Hmong do not believe that the Savior has taken away their sin and gives them a hope of heaven. They only believe what had been told or did by their ancestors. If you told them about Jesus Christ the Savior – their response is who is Jesus Christ and who care! We believe what our ancestors believed." <sup>25</sup> From my interviews and conversations with these men, I could tell their hearts were troubled as much as mine. I could feel the sadness they have for their Hmong brothers and sisters who still hold to the Hmong religion. It is a sad realization that the Hmong religion does not believe in a savior. This adds to the everyday fear of the believer in the Hmong religion.

Adding to the fear of animism is the belief in spirits.

"The Hmong are animist, people who believe in souls or spirits, in their practice of religion. The Hmong believe that the spiritual world coexist with the physical world. The spirit world consists of many types of spirits that influences the human life. Some types of spirits are ancestral spirits, household spirits, spirits in nature, and evil spirits." <sup>26</sup>

In animism, it is believed that humans and supernatural beings can cause harm to each other. Humans can do it unknowingly, but supernatural beings can do it on purpose. The spirits can pretty much do anything they want to humans if they do something wrong. If a person does as little as get in the spirit's space, the spirit could get angry. This is one reason the Hmong people believe they get sick. When a spirit is angry, they can cause illness or disease on the person or family. This can even be done by "nice" spirits. Evil spirits are a different story. They can cause harm for any reason they want. "Evil spirits are also thought to live in nature, usually in unhabitated areas. However, they have malevolent feelings toward humans and may attack passersby or even come to attack a village for no apparent reasons." <sup>27</sup> Evil spirits can take hold of the soul of any innocent person and they find the innocent as prey. The Hmong also fear harm to their soul in the afterlife. "The soul can also be

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<sup>24</sup> Interview #7 Question 7.

<sup>25</sup> Interview #4 Question 7.

<sup>26</sup> Interview #4 Question 3.

<sup>27</sup> Donald P. Irish ed. *Ethnic Variations in Dying, Death, and Grief: Diversity in Universality*. (Washington, DC: Taylor and Francis Publishers, 1993): 82.

subjected to consequences in the afterworld. If that is not enough, one will have to endure a harsh life in the next life when being reincarnated to the natural world." <sup>28</sup>

This is the fear the Hmong people live in every day. They are in constant fear of not just their physical lives here on earth but also the well-being of their souls for all eternity. Each day the Hmong are walking on eggshells and if they do something wrong, they will not just be punished by heaven but also by the spirits. Spirits are lurking around every corner waiting to attack them.

It is no doubt that Satan has used animism to bring harm to the Hmong people. It has been and always will be one of his tools. Animism is a fatal attempt by the Hmong to explain the world around them. "Christians would agree that there is a common origination of the religions; however, that source is the deceptiveness of Satan. Satan's devices are not new, and he is not infinitely creative, but he is a master of contextualization. He has carefully adapted a set of common beliefs and methods to individual people groups to give each one its own traditional religion." <sup>29</sup> The animistic beliefs of the Hmong keep them in Satan's trap and away from the truth. Satan wants the Hmong people miles away from the true God and stuck in their everyday fear. In no way does the devil want them finding comfort, but instead, he wants them on the fast track to hell. By holding to traditional animistic beliefs the Hmong people are failing to listen to God's revelation both in their hearts and also in nature. In the book of Romans God says that this is nothing new:

"The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles." <sup>30</sup>

Man has always exchanged the worship of their hearts with the worship of false gods. Satan fools man into thinking they can somehow control the world around them. This leads man to make up a religion that attempts to order the footsteps of man. Through animism the unexplainable is said to be explained. Animism is simply trying to control the spirits. Instead, it leads to a lack of control and leads to a fear of the spirits the devil uses to hurt and haunt them.

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<sup>28</sup> Ya Po Cha. *An Introduction to Hmong culture*. Jefferson, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> Kent Mundhenk. "Common Threads of Animism," *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 22 no 1 (2006): 7.

<sup>30</sup> Romans 1:18-23.



## Shamanism and the Fear it brings

In the animistic religion of the Hmong we find Shamanism. What is Shamanism? The answer to the question is complex. It was hard finding research because there are so many types of Shamanism. For example, there is African Shamanism and Native American Shamanism. Again, because the Hmong religion is primarily traditional and oral, gathering information is difficult. It took many different sources and conversations with Hmong people to find out what exactly a shaman really is. One Hmong described Shamanism this way: “Shamanism is a way to maintain communication with the spiritual world. Spirits of nature are believed to possibly cause physical and mental harm to Hmong in the disguise of illness, nightmares, and even death. To figure out the illness, shamans perform rituals so they can find a proper treatment.”<sup>31</sup> As stated before, Hmong religion is very spiritual. Shamanism provides the Hmong people with a way to stay connected to that spiritual world. This puts a lot of importance on the shaman and his ability to help them.

Part of the shaman’s importance comes with his role in the communities. When thinking of a pastor’s role, one thinks - he presides over worship, preaches a sermon, and leads Bible class. He is also available whenever someone has a problem they need discussed. A pastor is in charge of his flock's spiritual well-being. In certain respects, the shaman is very similar. When asked about Shamanism and the role of the shaman, the Hmong pastors I interviewed had a lot to say.

“In the Hmong community the shaman is the main person for anyone who has spiritual needs. In every village there is at least one shaman. To be a shaman one is chosen by the spirits. It doesn’t matter what age or sex to become a shaman. When chosen the person goes through a long illness and must accept his/her fate as a shaman. If s/he refuses s/he will remain ill. Each shaman has ‘teacher spirits’ who instruct him or her how to perform.

When a shaman cures a sick person s/he goes into a trance and veils his eyes with a black cloth to see the spirits. S/he sits on a bench and faces the altar. Then s/he calls his/her teacher spirits to come cure the patient.

A sickness can be caused when one’s soul is lost, captured by evil spirits, or offending an ancestral spirit. The shaman will discuss with ancestral spirits who may have been offended by the sick person and see what the spirits will ask for from the living. Shamans may bargain and struggle with wild spirits who have captured the patient’s soul, or locate the lost soul and persuade or force the soul back to its body.

Helping spirits differ in power and abilities. So when a shaman is unable to help the family they will look for a more powerful shaman. Hiring a shaman can be very expensive and cost the family a large portion of their resources.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Interview #4 Question 4.

<sup>32</sup> Interview #4 Question 4.

When asked about the shaman's role in Hmong religion and society, another Hmong pastor said, "In the Hmong community shaman is the spiritual healer and sometime the medicine man. The Hmong come to him or her whenever they are sick both physically and spiritually. Nowadays there are still many Hmong who would seek the shaman first and western medicine second." <sup>33</sup>

Shamanism revolves around the shaman and his role as helper. The shaman is the Hmong person's ambassador from the physical world to the spiritual world. The shaman serves an important role when someone gets sick because that means they have done something to harm the spiritual world. Sickness is a bad omen in the Hmong culture. If one becomes sick, that means they have done something to harm the spiritual world. The physical well-being of the person is then in the hands of the shaman. It is up to the shaman to negotiate with the spiritual world for that person's soul. Because of this, the shaman is honored and revered. He is the most highly respected person in the Hmong community and also in their religion. "The Shaman is a highly respected person in the community. Many Shamans believe they are able to heal many problems. They are able to connect to the spirit world and Hmong families that still believe the traditional ways have high honor for them." <sup>34</sup>

While researching Shamanism, there was question weighing on my heart: Can Shamanism bring comfort to its followers? Shamanism is a very serious thing and the souls of many people are at stake. The answer was found again through a Hmong family from Wausau. When asked to touch on the comfort or lack of comfort that comes with Shamanism, they answered, "It depends on the individual and extent of belief. If one is a strong believer, there's certainly hope and comfort. Typically individuals feel hopeful, comforted, and healed after a shaman performs the shamanic ritual of negotiating and offering animal sacrifices to spirits in exchange for an individual's lost soul that has left one's body." <sup>35</sup> The comfort of a Hmong person relies on the shaman. If he can do what he promises then they feel comfort.

Shamanism has a hold on the Hmong people. Satan has been using Shamanism to control the Hmong people for generations. In the Hmong world, spirits and ghosts are a very real thing. It is an everyday reality that they have to live with. The older generations of Hmong who lived in Laos and Thailand saw the reality of ghosts and evil spirits sent from Satan. When the Hmong people have fear, Satan wants them to go to the Shaman for help. He wants them to believe that the shaman is the one who can cure them both physically and spiritually. Satan wants the shaman to be their savior.

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<sup>33</sup> Interview #5, Question 3.

<sup>34</sup> Interview #7, Question 4.

<sup>35</sup> Interview #1, Question 2.

But what happens when the shaman fails? Where will they turn then? In no way does Satan want them to turn to Christ. In this way, Shamanism has been a very difficult wall to break down when evangelizing to the Hmong. In many of the Hmong pastors' ministries, Shamanism has been a barrier. If someone would turn from Shamanism to Christianity they would be seen as a traitor. "The Hmong unbelievers usually accuse the Hmong believers of betraying the ancestors and worshiping the Western god."<sup>36</sup> Because the Hmong religion is so closely related to family and community, it is very difficult for someone to leave it. Another Hmong pastor supported this by saying, "Shamans believe their powers are given to them by the god of the heavenly sky to help the Hmong people and to tell them that their work can't save, like that of Christ, means we are disrespecting them. For the most part, that would lead to argument or tension because they do not believe God's Word is true, but rather ideas composed by scholars."<sup>37</sup> Instead of turning to Christ, Satan has the Hmong people sticking close to their traditions. He has instilled in them a fear of leaving their past. If they leave the Hmong religion, they are disgracing it and their family. But if they stay, they are keeping in harm's way.

In fear, Satan wants the Hmong going from shaman to shaman begging them to use whatever powers they have to cure their problems. It is a never ending cycle of fear and control. Shamanism puts a noose around the Hmong people's necks. If the Hmong do something wrong that Satan does not like, the noose gets tighter. Under the disguise of Shamanism, Satan whispers in the ears of the Hmong, "You have to worship me. Go to the shaman and do whatever he says. Sacrifice countless animals which you are really sacrificing to me." And when the Hmong do what Satan wants, the noose gets looser leading them to think they are acting correctly. The Hmong live in fear of offending higher powers.

### **Ancestor Worship and the Fear it brings.**

Another part of the Hmong animistic religion is ancestor worship. Ancestor worship is pretty much what it suggests; it is worshiping your ancestors who die before you. Whether it is your deceased father, mother, grandfather, or grandmother ancestors are worshiped. This is very important to the Hmong community and is one of the main aspects of the Hmong religion.

The article I read titled *Christianity and Ancestor Worship in Japan*, was written by Naoko Komuro. It gave me some insights as to why the Hmong practice ancestor worship.

"Takashi Maeda points to the social factors responsible for the rise of ancestor worship. He

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<sup>36</sup> Interview #6, Question 4.

<sup>37</sup> Interview #5, Question 3.

refers to an agricultural society as one of the most powerful factors underlying the custom. Ancestor worship is generated by the fact that survivors always cherish a fresh memory of the deceased members of their families. The freshness of the memory intensifies the worship. In order for the dead to remain fresh in the memory, it is necessary that some object of reminiscence, such as a house, a legacy, or a grave, always remain within the daily reach of the descendants." <sup>38</sup>

Many of the factors that led to the ancestor worship of the Japanese may have led to the ancestor worship of the Hmong.

This led to the question, why do the Hmong do this? What is the appeal of ancestor worship? To understand why the Hmong worship their ancestors, I again asked the Hmong pastors some questions. I asked them what the Hmong believe about ancestor worship and why they do it. One Hmong pastors answered this way:

“It’s a respect and honor for the dead and they think good fortune will be blessed upon them. They believe that when your ancestor dies they have the ability to bless you. They have the ability to take away fortune and bring curses and different things. It is a major contributor who protects your crops and investments and everything you have in your life including your children. Ancestor worship is a major role with especially men. When your father dies you really have to heed his spirit and ask him to protect your family and bring you fortune. Wealth and good fortune comes from your ancestor.” <sup>39</sup>

Another Hmong pastor gave a very simple, yet effective answer to this question. He said, “They believe that their ancestors will protect them from illness and provide them with prosperity. Why do the Hmong people do that (believe their ancestors)? They do it because every generation had been told to do so by their ancestors.” <sup>40</sup>

As you can see, ancestor worship has a great impact on the spiritual beliefs and well-being of the individual Hmong person. Another Hmong pastor supported this by saying,

“Hmong people believe that when you passed you live in another world - a world not similar to Heaven or Hell. A place like on earth. There you still need things to keep you going. That is why when a person dies at the funeral they will kill many cows and chicken to also offer to the died to bring along with them on their journey to the other world. When that person runs out of things and need things they will come back and have dreams to tell or have someone in the house become sick. This in turn will let them know that they have to burn more paper money or do what they have to do to satisfy the spirit.” <sup>41</sup>

The spiritual well-being of the Hmong people relies greatly on their ancestors. That is why the Hmong

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<sup>38</sup> Naoko Komuro. "Christianity and Ancestor Worship in Japan." *Studies in World Christianity*, 9 no 1 (2003), 64-65.

<sup>39</sup> Interview #2, Question 5.

<sup>40</sup> Interview #4, Question 5 .

<sup>41</sup> Interview #7, Question 5.

have so many ceremonies for worshipping their ancestors. When they perform these rituals they believe the spirits will protect their souls and deliver them from harm's way. "When these rituals are performed properly, the spirits will protect the souls of the living. They will also protect the reputation, luck, wealth, and health of family members." <sup>42</sup>

The Hmong worship their ancestors for physical guidance and protection. While listening to the Hmong pastor's sermon on shamanism and ancestor worship, Pastor Yang gave a primary example of calling on the spirits of dead family members for protection. In his sermon he noted that ancestor worship is worshipping those who die before you. It can also be an important person in the Hmong community. Every year, the ancestors have to be called on and, the ancestor's spirit has to come back for a dinner that is prepared. The spirits are called on and then you eat with them. After this worship is done, protection is now available. Protection from harm can come in many different forms. The Hmong pastor said it could be as simple as going hunting. If Hmong people are afraid of danger or a ghost, the ancestors would then be called on for protection. You could say that the Hmong person is praying to that certain family member, and it is a give and take relationship. If the ancestor provides protection from harm during that hunt, the Hmong person would then sacrifice an animal for the ancestor once they returned home.

As stated, a big part of my paper is looking into the fear that comes with Hmong religion. After speaking with many Hmong pastors, I realized there is a sense of fear that comes with ancestor worship. I asked the Hmong pastors why ancestor worship can be a challenge when trying to change. One pastor said,

"The major part is that I love my father and I do not want to bring disgrace to him. I want to worship him so that his spirit will not be a hungry ghost wandering around without a place to rest or a place to depend upon. I need to do this duty to my dead ancestors so I can worship them and bring lots of blessing to me. In the gospel, it is a different track. To believe that gospel means to cut away from my relatives; also I cut from worshipping them so I do not have any connection with my family. That is a big obstacle." <sup>43</sup>

Part of the fear that comes with ancestor worship is the fear of disgracing their ancestors. "The Hmong do not believe that God is the creator. They believe that the reason they come to existence is because their parents gave birth to them. To tell the Hmong not to worship their ancestors, but Christ, means that we are disrespecting them and their ancestors." <sup>44</sup> If the Hmong do not properly worship their ancestors and if they turn their backs on them, they believe they will not have a good life. To achieve a

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<sup>42</sup> Ya Po Cha. *An Introduction to Hmong culture*. Jefferson, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2010).

<sup>43</sup> Interview #2, Question 5.

<sup>44</sup> Interview #5, Question 4.

peaceful life, they need to respect and worship their dead ancestors. This leads to a daily fear of wondering if they are doing it correctly or if they have done enough. If not, their ancestors will become angry with them.

Part of the problem with Hmong ancestor worship is who they are worshiping. They are not worshiping the true God but rather the spirits of dead human beings. "Ancestral worship, which is the most complete and the ultimate expression of this filial piety, is perfectly consistent with polytheism, agnosticism, and atheism. It makes dead men into gods, and its only gods are dead men."<sup>45</sup> Through ancestor worship the Hmong are putting a lot on the shoulders of their ancestors. The comfort of their spiritual well-being is relied solely on the dead. Their physical well-being on earth and success of their life is all up to their ancestors. The Hmong are worshiping the souls of people who cannot help them. They are calling on spirits who cannot hear them. They fear punishment from their ancestors so the Hmong do all they can to make sure they are not harmed. This includes worshiping them as their god. This is another lie from the devil to keep the Hmong from the true God. Satan is directing worship from the One who greatly deserves it to dead humans who in no way deserve it. To the Hmong and to those who hold to the Chinese traditional beliefs, breaking the worship of ancestors is unforgivable. Generation after generation is bound to this fear.

## **Death and Fear**

### **Death: The journey of the soul**

If you were to die tonight where would do you think you would be? This is a common question that is asked when evangelizing. This question gives perspective on a person's view of death and where their soul will go when they die. Some people are hesitant to answer. They have either not thought about the question or are not sure where the soul will go after death. If they have never thought of it before they were asked, they will start to think about it now. Because of my faith in Christ, I am able to answer that question with absolute certainty. Because of my faith, I can confidently say my soul will be in heaven when I die.

For the Hmong people, however, death is very different. I asked the Hmong pastors to describe for me the Hmong concept of life after death.

“The factor about heaven and hell is not discussed in the Hmong culture. They do not want to hear about hell. There are too many times where it has made people angry and fearful because they believe when you die you journey to this place with your ancestors. To describe this place

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<sup>45</sup> Arthur H. Smith. *Chinese Characteristics*. (New York: Young People's Missionary Movement, 1907), 184.

as hungry, dark, or cold makes it not a very pretty place but Hmong believe that when you die you journey to live with your ancestors in the other side. They do not want to plainly tell you in specifics which place it is. But it is a place where your relatives live. For us that is definitely hell but if you would tell them that it would bring animosity and argument. They will try to fight it so it can defend their own beliefs.”<sup>46</sup>

As Christians, the Hmong pastors gave me great insight. They not only told me the Hmong side of the story but they also put it into their own Christian perspective. When talking with Pastor Yang, he said this about the Hmong concept of death, “When you die you will go to live with your ancestors. For us they would say we would go back to China, where we originally came from. Everyone will know each other and work on the farms. Why would I want to do that when I can go to heaven?”<sup>47</sup>

From my discussions with the Hmong pastors about life after death, I began to understand the Hmong believe both life and death is a journey. In life, the soul of a human being is on a journey from Heaven. The soul comes from the realm of the ancestors and gives life to a body. The events of one's life are then laid out for them. Every action or event in their life is predestined.

In death the soul is also on a journey.

“Hmong people do believe that there is life after death. There is a place that you will have to go to. During the beginning part of a funeral service there is what we call a translation in English ( *taw kev*)” the one who appoints the way”. That person will lead the deceased back to where he or she came from, back to the birthplace, and then on the journey to the other world and then to a place to meet the relatives that have past before them.”<sup>48</sup>

To ensure the person's soul accomplishes its journey, a proper funeral is important. A funeral is not only important to their religion but also to their community. Proper funeral preparations also guarantee that all the person's debts from his or her earthly life are settled. "The rituals resolve all conflicts and debts a person may have. It removes all obstacles the soul may face during the journey. It also paves the way for the soul to journey into the spiritual world with dignity."<sup>49</sup> From my understanding of these Hmong customs, the soul's fate greatly depends on the actions of other people. If other people are not doing what they are supposed to, the fate of the soul will be in grave danger. This puts a lot of pressure on the Hmong people to do everything right.

There is one person who has a very important role in the funeral. This person is called the path pointer. This person is in charge of guiding the soul in its journey back to the realm of the ancestors.

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<sup>46</sup> Interview #2, Question 6.

<sup>47</sup> Interview #3, Question 6.

<sup>48</sup> Interview #7, Question 6.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

In this case, the term "ancestors" does not mean the realm of the forefathers. "However, the term 'ancestors' in this case refers to the new parents into whom the soul of the deceased is going to reincarnate."<sup>50</sup> To make sure this happens the path pointer not only guides the soul to the ancestors but also instructs it. But before this happens the journey of the soul starts by asking the spirits of the house<sup>51</sup> if they can leave. Once this happens, then the process can begin.

Part of the soul's journey is finding its way back to the place of birth. The path pointer is the one that helps the soul find it.

"The path pointer chants a narration of every step. The chanting guides the soul as it backtracks through every permanent settlement the deceased has ever occupied, starting with the most recent and ending at the place of birth. The backtracking is the journey back to the place of birth. At each city, village or town in which the deceased has lived, the path pointer helps thank all the spirits of the land, paying them dues with paper money. The soul has to pay the regional spirits to thank them because it had used their land and their natural resources....When the soul has reached the birthplace, it is instructed to recover its placenta, or the silk coat (*tsho tsuj tsho npuag*). Only when the placenta is recovered can the soul reincarnate again."<sup>52</sup>

The finding of the placenta plays a huge part in the person's fate after death. "Without symbolically obtaining the placenta, the deceased person's soul will not be able to return to the spirits world."<sup>53</sup>

Without the guidance and step by step instructions of the path pointer the soul will never be able to find the placenta. The soul's fate rests in the hands of the path pointer.

For the soul, this is the easy part. The next part of the soul's journey is difficult. It is a path paved with danger. Next comes the land of darkness. Up to this point the path pointer could help guide the spirit but when the soul reaches the land of darkness, the soul is on its own. The final part of the journey means the soul has to make a decision. This part of the ritual has discrepancy. There are many different versions of this part of the ritual. Here is what is commonly believed:

"One version tells the soul to crawl into the ancestor who has a dark face and an open skirt. The other version tells the soul that it will have to traverse through many obstacles and finally come to a forked road. The road will branch into three. The correct path is the one in the middle where there is clear water to wade through to find the ancestors. In either case, the path pointer directs the soul right into the womb of the new mother the soul is to reincarnate into."<sup>54</sup>

Choosing the middle path leads the soul into the land of the ancestors. Although the family members cannot do much to safeguard the soul's arrival into the land of the ancestors, they can still offer

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> The Hmong people believe in house spirits. House spirits reside in the house of each Hmong and watch over them.

<sup>52</sup> Ya Po Cha. *An Introduction to Hmong culture*. Jefferson, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2010).

<sup>53</sup> Donald P. Irish ed. *Ethnic Variations in Dying, Death, and Grief: Diversity in Universality*. (Washington, DC: Taylor and Francis Publishers, 1993): 86.

<sup>54</sup> Ya Po Cha. *An Introduction to Hmong culture*. Jefferson, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2010).



sacrifices and paper money to make sure it is an easier journey.

Part of death is reincarnation. This is a very important belief of the Hmong religion. As one Hmong pastor said, "Reincarnation is a pillar of the Hmong faith....The main reason the funeral rituals are performed is so that the dead will be reborn into the same family."<sup>55</sup> After death the funeral itself cannot be held right away because the first ten days after death is the time the soul takes to get acquainted with the afterlife. On the thirteenth day, the funeral is held. At this time, the soul comes back home after being sent to Heaven to be reincarnated. The soul can then be reincarnated into any life form. The most respectable reincarnation comes in the form of human life.

"In the perception of many Hmong people, life in human form is very desirable. It is thought that if one lives in an ethical and moral way, rebirth as a human will come sooner. If one does not live in a good way, she or he will accumulate karmic debts that will have to be paid. As punishment, the person may be reassigned to earth as an animal or even a plant. Being reassigned as a rock is considered especially terrible because a rock never dies, and the soul may never be able to re-enter the world as a person."<sup>56</sup>

The body in the grave also is important for a proper reincarnation. If the body does not decompose entirely into the ground, the soul will not reincarnate.

### **Death: Comfort or Fear?**

Death is a natural part of life and we hear about it quite often. Death from a natural disaster is reported on the news. You witness your grandparents passing away from old age. Whether people admit it or not, death is on their mind in some way. For some, death can be a frightful thing but for others, it can be a thing of comfort.

Life after death can bring uncertainty for the Hmong. If a Hmong person dies, where will their soul go? Will it make it to the land of the ancestors, or get lost along the way? Over the years many traditions and rituals can be lost. Generation after generation, keeping to the rituals can be hard to do. The Hmong family I interviewed shared this concern. They said, "It was hard to learn all the rituals and customs of the religion."<sup>57</sup> The ritual of Hmong worship and funerals is not easy to carry out. There are many intricate details that need to be kept. What happens if one of the generations does not know how to carry out the funeral process? What if someone is not able to become the path pointer? If no one is able to be the path pointer, then the confidence of the soul reaching the realm of the ancestors

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<sup>55</sup> Interview #5, Question 5- Reincarnation .

<sup>56</sup> Donald P. Irish ed. *Ethnic Variations in Dying, Death, and Grief: Diversity in Universality*. (Washington, DC: Taylor and Francis Publishers, 1993): 83-84.

<sup>57</sup> Interview #1 Question 3.

will fade out. Generation after generation the importance of ritual may be lost.

A sense of salvation by works adds to the fear and uncertainty of life after death. The soul is saved if the path pointer and family member can do enough. If the path pointer does what he is supposed to, the soul has a better chance at reaching its goal. If the family members perform the sacrifices of animals and money the journey will be easier. Once reaching the fork in the road, the soul itself even has to pick the right path. Salvation relies solely on the shoulders of human beings. This is a problem because people falter and are prone to mistakes.

From what I heard and read about the Hmong belief of reincarnation, I could not help but feel scared for the Hmong people. Their goal is to be reincarnated into a new life form. Human life is the ultimate achievement. They have to live a good life to reach that. If they do enough by keeping their moral and ethical code, then their chances are better. The "salvation" of their soul relies on effort. While on earth, if they have slipped and broken their code of ethics, their soul will be in trouble in the next life. Have I done enough? Each day the Hmong have to ask that question. The outcome of a person's soul should never be subjected to works. When it does, Satan brings fear and uncertainty.

## **The Bible's Response to Hmong Religion**

### **The worship of false gods**

Now that I have given an overview of the Hmong religion, I feel it is important to put it in the light of the Bible. For my own sake, I wanted to know how to respond to the aspects of Hmong religion with the truth of the Scriptures. I can read everything written on Hmong religion, but I feel it is important for me and every Christian to know what God says about it. There are many religions in this world. God tells us to test the things said by men to prove its validity. (1 John 4:1)<sup>58</sup> One way I can test the beliefs of the Hmong religion, is to compare them to what Scripture says. That is what I want to do in this section of my paper. I also write this for you as an encouragement to go back to what God says whenever you are dealing with something you are unsure about, especially another religion.

Hmong religion is opposite of the religion found in the Bible. When it comes down to it Hmong religion is a religion of false gods. Through animism, they believe that the spirits are the center of their world instead of the true God. Each day their lives are dedicated to the spirits and they believe the spirits are what give life. This demeans the gift of life given through God alone. The Hmong belief in Heaven as the Supreme Being robs God of all glory and honor. Through Shamanism, they make the

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<sup>58</sup> "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world."

shaman into the person they go to for spiritual troubles rather than getting help through Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. If there is a disturbance in their life, they do not turn to the God who can cure it but to Satan who is hiding behind the shaman. Through ancestor worship, they pay tribute and sacrifice to one's ancestors in return for protection from evil spirits and good health. As noted earlier, they make dead men into their god. For the Hmong, salvation does not come through the blood of Christ but rather through something else.

God feels very strongly about the worship of anything other than the true God. Early in history the Lord knew people would have a problem with dedicating worship to him alone. We find evidence of this through the nation of Israel. In Deuteronomy chapter 7, the Lord says this about Israel: "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession."<sup>59</sup> As the Lord's chosen people, they were only to worship him. The Lord tells his people this in Deuteronomy chapter 6: "Fear the LORD your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name."<sup>60</sup> Jesus even quotes this verse in the New Testament. In Luke chapter 4 Jesus says, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"<sup>61</sup> By quoting this verse Jesus is telling his New Testament believers that this applies to them as well. This includes all believers today.

The Lord commands worship of the true God through the Ten Commandments. In Exodus chapter 20 the Lord gives his people guidelines for worship.

"You shall have no other gods before me. "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments."<sup>62</sup>

In that section from Exodus the Lord calls himself a jealous God. He is jealous in the way that he will not share his praise with idols. (Isaiah 42:8)<sup>63</sup> Worshiping the true God was not always easy for Israel to do. Shortly after the Lord gave his ten commandments the hearts of the Israelites strayed. In Exodus chapter 32 they worshiped the golden calf. When Moses took too long up on Mount Sinai, the Israelites grew restless. They thought God had abandoned them, so they told Aaron to make for them a god that they saw fit. In their sinfulness, the Israelites turned away from what God had commanded

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<sup>59</sup> Deuteronomy 7:6.

<sup>60</sup> Deuteronomy 6:13.

<sup>61</sup> Luke 4:8.

<sup>62</sup> Exodus 20:3-6.

<sup>63</sup> "I am the Lord; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols."

them. They exchanged worship of the true God for a god that was created by man. The anger of the Lord burned against them. The hearts of the Israelites were fickle throughout their history. In Numbers chapter 25 it says,

"While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate and bowed down before these gods. So Israel joined in worshiping the Baal of Peor. And the LORD's anger burned against them."

With forgetful minds, the Israelites worshiped Baal. Once again, the Lord's anger burned against them.

The perfect and holy God of heaven takes false worship seriously. To make people realize just how serious it is, he establishes his authority over false gods. In Psalm 135 the Lord says,

"The idols of the nations are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, nor is there breath in their mouths. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them."<sup>64</sup>

Through these words, the Lord is saying that false gods are useless. In Hmong religion, the spirits of the dead and men like the shaman are made to be like gods. The Hmong believe they have a godlike power. They believe they can help but in reality they cannot. Their false gods do not have the attributes of the true God and they do not have mouths to speak the saving truth. Instead, they spew lies that lead to damnation. They do not have ears to listen to the cries of the people so cries for help fall on deaf ears and leave the Hmong people abandoned by their gods. The gods of the Hmong have no breath of life but instead are created by Satan to bring fear and discomfort. Those who believe in these false gods will end up just like them. They will be nothing and this fills the Christian heart with sadness. The fact that Satan is leading the Hmong people to hell motivates us to let the Hmong people know that we have a God unlike any other. We have a God who listens, speaks, and is alive.

The Lord himself tells us through the Scriptures that there is no God other than him. In Isaiah chapter 44 the Lord says, "This is what the LORD says— Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God."<sup>65</sup> Our God is the God from everlasting to everlasting. He is the only one able to deliver his people from both physical and spiritual enemies. Our God is the only one who can claim to be the eternal deity. The Hmong people can search all they want for their god. They can stick close to their rituals and do everything according to their long lasting traditions but apart from God, there is nothing. The Hmong belief in Heaven is not a true

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<sup>64</sup> Psalm 135:15-18.

<sup>65</sup> Isaiah 44:6.

God. Shao is neither God nor a Savior. People can search all they want and can make their god into anything they want, but they will only find truth and comfort through the God who reigns in heaven and watches over his people. "Is there any God besides me? No there is no other Rock; I know not one."<sup>66</sup>

### **The Biblical view of death**

What the Bible says about death is vital for every human being. It is vital for the Hmong to hear about what the Bible says about death because their view is misguided. A biblical definition of death is found in the book of James. In James chapter 2 it says, "The body without the spirit is dead."<sup>67</sup> Death is when the spirit leaves the body. When a person dies, their body is buried in the grave and the spirit separates. This point is given in the book of Ecclesiastes. In Ecclesiastes chapter 12, God says, "The dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

As noted earlier, the Hmong religion believes in reincarnation. During my second year at the seminary, I took a class during winterim called *Cultism in America*. For this class, I had to give a presentation on a cult. The cult I chose believed in reincarnation after death. I knew this was wrong, but I did not know exactly how to prove it. This caused me to take a deep look at Scripture. Although the Scriptures do not specifically say the word "reincarnation", it does speak on the issue. One passage I found very helpful when dealing with the idea of reincarnation is found in the book of Hebrews. Hebrews chapter 9 says, "Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment."<sup>68</sup> Death came as a result of the first sin in the Garden of Eden. Man was never intended to die. Adam and Eve were to live in paradise forever never to see death. Because of sin, the death sentence was pronounced on the entire human race. At death, a person is judged by the perfect and holy God. The verdict is either heaven, because of faith in Christ, or hell because of the person's rejection of the true God. This happens just once and the soul remains in heaven or hell for all eternity. The soul does not reincarnate into something else.

I also found the account of the rich man and poor Lazarus to be helpful when dealing with life after death. In Luke Chapter 16 Jesus tells a story about a rich man who had everything, but because he was an unbeliever he went to hell. There was also a poor beggar named Lazarus who only had his faith in Christ. His faith was what gave him the gift of heaven after death. While in the agony of hell, the

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<sup>66</sup> Isaiah 44:8b.

<sup>67</sup> James 2:26.

<sup>68</sup> Hebrews 9:27.

rich man wanted nothing more than a drop of water to cool his tongue. He called to heaven for relief. In heaven, Abraham replied, "And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us." <sup>69</sup> Then the rich man asked if Lazarus could be sent to his family to warn them of hell. He believed that if someone could come back from the dead his family would repent and believe. But Abraham said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." <sup>70</sup> This account from the Bible gives us much insight into life after death. "And thus, whether we say the story is a parable or actual history, we may say that the account of the rich man and Lazarus gives us an insight into actual conditions in the next world. When men die, they either go to heaven or to hell. <sup>71</sup>

For people who are uncertain, death is scary. But for the certain in Christ, death is peace. When the Bible speaks of death, it speaks words of comfort. Because of Christ, death is a blessing. Paul understood this very well. He says in Philippians chapter 1, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." <sup>72</sup> Paul knew that his life on earth was one spent serving Christ. Through his life Paul would receive his strength from Jesus alone. He was thankful Christ converted him and could rejoice at the fact. Christ was with him every step of the way. He also knew that through death he would gain something extraordinary. Physical death meant gain for Paul. It would mean that he would get to be with his Savior forever. Death is gain because it is a release from the sin of this world. In heaven, the attacks of Satan will be long gone, and he will no longer be able to tempt us away from worship of the true God. Death is gain because it brings Christ to us and us to Christ.

The Bible also gives comfort through the resurrection. For the believer in Christ, death is not the end. Why will this happen? It will happen because of Christ. Jesus calls himself "the resurrection and the life." <sup>73</sup> Because Jesus raised from the dead on that first Easter morning those who believe in him will have eternal life. Jesus goes on to say, "He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." <sup>74</sup> Even though a Christian will die, he or she will live forever. Not only will their soul go to live with Christ forever, but also on the last day, their body will rise to be joined with the soul. On the Last Day, there will be the resurrection of the dead. The

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<sup>69</sup> Luke 16:26.

<sup>70</sup> Luke 16:31.

<sup>71</sup> Siegbert W. Becker, "The State of the Soul After Death." (A paper delivered to the Provisio Conference, Lyons, IL on May 3, 1957): 4.

<sup>72</sup> Philippians 1:21.

<sup>73</sup> John 11:25.

<sup>74</sup> John 11:25b-26.

great resurrection chapter of 1 Corinthians goes into great detail of what will happen. Paul says in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, "Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed."<sup>75</sup> Here, Paul is saying that all those who have lived to the end or those who die before the last day will be changed at the return of Christ. In the twinkling of an eye the believer's physical state will be changed. It will be a miraculous transformation. It is indicated that the last trumpet call will announce the coming of the resurrection. At that moment, the dead will rise and be made into an imperishable state. All believers will be changed and then spend eternity in heaven. In heaven, death will be no more and we will only know happiness and bliss.

Not too long ago, I got into a discussion with a co-worker about death. It made me realize many people have questions about life after death. It also made me realize that there are many people in this world who have a firm belief about life after death that is contrary to the Bible. There will be many times in my life where I will be asked about my beliefs. People will come to me with questions that have been troubling their souls. For their sake, I want to be able to help. I want to know what God says about death and other issues, so that I can communicate the wonderful truths of Scripture. This is why I not only gave the Bible's response to the Hmong religion but also its response to the Hmong belief about death. Wherever I go as a pastor, there will be a mission field. Whether it be Hmong or even Anglo, the souls of people need to know what the Bible says on this issue. To me, the Hmong belief of death is scary. Knowing the truths of Scripture about death, however, will equip me to answer questions with words of hope and comfort.

## **Reaching the Hmong**

### **Now What?**

As I have said, during my vicar year, I was able to get some experience working with Hmong people. I was able to have good conversations with the Hmong pastor at my church and this allowed me to become familiar with him. I had the blessing of being around a Hmong family who converted to Christianity and became members of the Wisconsin Synod. After church, I would spend much time catching up on the week and how work was going for them. It was great getting to know these Hmong Christians, and I will try my best to keep in touch with them. It was easy to get to know them because I knew they believed in Jesus Christ as their Savior. I have to admit I did not always know how to act

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<sup>75</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:51-52.

around Hmong people who were not Christian. Whenever I would go grocery shopping or just run around town, I would pass by Hmong people. Part of me would want to avoid them, but another part of me was yelling, "Go talk to them about Jesus!" My nerves usually got the best of me, and I would just smile, say hi, and then walk away. Time after time I felt like I had not only let God down but also the Hmong people who need to know their Savior. I realized my response to the Hmong religion had to change.

Thus far, my paper has dealt with the Hmong religion and what it is made up of. I have also given the Bible's response to the matter. If you are like me you might ask yourself, "That's all great, but now what? How do I actually reach these people?" In this last section of my paper, I will attempt to take this paper one step further and look into ways we, as Christians, can reach the Hmong.

### **It is not about us, it is about Him.**

I have spent a lot of time thinking about how the Hmong people can be reached. I have asked myself what is the bridge that goes between Hmong religion and Christianity. Since I only had a taste of Hmong outreach during my vicar year, I want to know more about evangelizing to this specific minority in America. To get answers, I turned to those who are directly involved with Hmong outreach in their own communities, the Hmong pastors.

From their experience, I asked them to communicate to me the best ways they have found to reach the Hmong in their communities. One pastor who is doing a lot of outreach in the Midwest told me,

"I think based on their religion and their kinship and community that they gather around, it is very difficult to reach out to them - the gospel itself, the Word itself, and the power of the gospel with the Holy Spirit. God has his own purpose to reach out to this people so God in his timing will call and collect individual people from this community to believe in Jesus Christ. What I found is that when people try their shaman and their religion to fix their problem for a long time and if their problem is not going away they will like to try Christianity and Jesus Christ. At the same time when problems are not solved through shaman then they may consult the pastor for counseling and the Gospel. The Bible is Scripture and is really good at telling people what to do and not to do. It tells people about sin and grace. Things like that can help this individual people look to the Scripture to teach about life and a change of life with peace and grace. This is what we try to do. But what the most interesting part is that the Holy Spirit is the one who works and converts people in his own time. Overall when people have trouble it is not a bad thing because they try the shaman or a doctor but Jesus will be the last thing they try.

Another Hmong pastor wrote me this in an email:

"The best way is to spread the seed of the gospel in the heart of the Hmong people and pray that



the Holy Spirit will shower the seed of the gospel to sprout and grow.

We are sinner and flesh, we cannot overcome the power of the evil but only through the power of the gospel that can penetrate through the heart of the Hmong people and believe the Savior.

How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who brings Good News of good things”(Romans 10: 14-15 NASB).

For I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law (1 Cor. 9:19-20 NASB).

Sharing the good news of Christ to the lost souls is the only perfect love that can be attained by man – through Christ.”<sup>76</sup>

One Hmong pastor made me realize that we have to meet the needs of the Hmong people. To me, this means that we go to them. As Christians, we need to communicate our love to the Hmong by reaching them on their level. A lot of Hmong outreach can be done over the radio. “In the US, not only the Hmong believers listen to Hmong Christian radio but the unbelievers also listen. For example, more than 80% of the Hmong believers in China and Vietnam believe in Christ through radio work. They never see a missionary, or a preacher, or a pastor. All they hear and know is through the radio work.”<sup>77</sup> During my vicar year, I realized this to be a great avenue for outreach.

As Christians, we also need to meet them on their level by equipping the members of our churches to reach out. “Seventy-five percent of those who come to church are reached out to by family members, not the pastors. So I think we need to train the members to be evangelists.”<sup>78</sup> When reaching the Hmong, relationships are key. The love of Christ motivates us to build relationships with people of all nations. When people come into contact with a Christian, they oftentimes can feel the love they have for their Savior and their neighbor. “You need to take the time to get to know them and their story and background. That is what we tend to make a lot of mistakes. We have to remember it is cross-cultural. It is harder for the Hmong because we are already two hundred years behind the Anglo. It is hard because they believe in the Hmong tradition. The best way is to just be there for them.”<sup>79</sup> When someone knows you are there for them, open and honest discussion follows. A trusting

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<sup>76</sup> Interview #4, Question 9.

<sup>77</sup> Interview #8.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Interview #2, Question 9.

relationship is built, opening up opportunities to talk to them about the hope you have in Christ.

When reaching anyone, it all comes down to Christ. During my time of thought and talking with Hmong Pastors and Christians, I have realized it is all about Jesus. When evangelizing, you can try to draw up some fancy plan that you think will win the hearts of the person you are witnessing to. A lot of times we think a person's conversion depends on our own efforts, but rather it is all about Jesus. When I interviewed the Christian Hmong family, they supported this idea. Being former believers in Hmong religion, they provided great perspective. The following is a portion from that interview.

“The church can reach out by educating the Hmong about how Christ can liberate them from the bonds of the spirits. In particular, the younger generation who find it difficult to learn or carry on the traditions of the Hmong religion.”<sup>80</sup>

This gave me a lot of encouragement. It is truly a miracle of God when someone, not just the Hmong, is converted by the power of the Gospel. It is even more amazing when someone believes just after talking to them once. When witnessing to the Hmong, however, it can be more complicated. Building a relationship is vital. The more you get to know someone the more they trust you. You respect them along with their thoughts and beliefs. The more you get to know a Hmong person, the stronger the relationship will be. When a relationship is established, the subject of religion can be brought up. You can invite them to bible classes or even a Bible Information Class which our churches often have. Through a mutual trust and respect, they will be more willing to listen to what you have to say. They will be more open to hear what Christianity has to offer. Through education and witnessing, the topic of Jesus will be brought up. As the Hmong family said, "The church can reach out by educating the Hmong about how Christ can liberate them from the bonds of the spirits." As discussed in this paper, the Hmong religion causes more harm than good. It binds its people to a slavery of fear and spirits which are evil. But through Christ, Hmong people can learn what God they really have. The God that created all people is not a God of fear. He is not a God that demands animal and money sacrifices, and He does not hide around every corner waiting to steal their soul and make them sick. He does not demand a perfect life in order to be saved. The Hmong people need to know that the true God is a God of love. He sent his Son to be the sacrifice for our sin once and for all. Jesus lived a perfect life in our place. Through his Son, he has liberated and set free the hearts of his people from all fear. The true God does not look to punish his people, but instead, through the blood of Christ, he looks to forgive.

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<sup>80</sup> Interview #1. Question 7.

The Hmong desperately need to hear these Gospel truths. The power of the Gospel, coupled with the power of the Holy Spirit, can and does produce results. In the book of Titus it says, "He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit."<sup>81</sup> The Holy Spirit brought me to faith, and it can bring our Hmong brothers and sisters to faith as well.

### **Can Christianity make a difference?**

Can Christianity really make a difference in the lives of those we are trying to reach? It most certainly can. For evidence of this I turn once again to the Hmong family who became Christians. To see the difference Christianity can make in the life of a Hmong person, I asked them to compare their life before becoming a Christian to life with Christianity.

"How would you compare your life before becoming a Christian to after becoming a Christian? Our life prior to becoming a Christian was very difficult in that whenever a family member was ill, we'd have to ask my mother and older brothers and sisters for assistance in securing a shaman to perform the healing ritual because we didn't know how to properly seek the Shaman's services. Further, the rituals were always costly because we had to make animal sacrifices such as chickens, pigs, or cows as well as properly thank and pay the Shaman for his/her services. Our life after becoming Christians is so much simpler because we do not have to worry anymore, especially, having to learn the rituals and making appropriate sacrifices."<sup>82</sup>

As you can see, life before Christ was difficult. It was more complicated. After becoming Christians, life is simpler. They do not have to worry anymore if they are doing things right, and they do not have to learn all the traditional rituals. Their hearts have been put at ease. I then asked them how their lives have changed now that they are Christians.

"Our life has changed for the better. We are liberated from the bonds of spirits; we are freed from the spirits. Christianity has relieved us of our sacrificial duties to appease the spirits and do not have to constantly worry about offending the spirits. Our family is a lot closer now and more connected because we share the same belief."<sup>83</sup>

Change is not always the greatest thing that can happen to someone, but for this family it was a blessing. They now know from experience all the blessings offered through Christ. I also asked them where they now find hope and comfort. They said, "We find hope and comfort in Jesus Christ and God. Whenever we are lost, sad, or scared, we talk to God through Jesus and ask for assistance, guidance,

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<sup>81</sup> Titus 3:5.

<sup>82</sup> Interview #1 Question 4.

<sup>83</sup> Interview #1. Question 5.

and forgiveness through prayers." <sup>84</sup> The difference Christ can make is the forgiveness of sins. He clears the conscience of a sinner and takes away all guilt. Christianity does not bring this Hmong family fear. Christ removes all fear in life and in death. This is what Christianity can do for not only you and me but for Hmong people as well. Hope and comfort can be theirs through Jesus Christ.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, researching and writing this paper has made me realize the Hmong religion causes its followers to live a life of fear. Every day they have to fear that an evil spirit might make them sick or cause great harm to their family. They have to do everything they can to appease these evil spirits so they can have a peaceful life. Satan wants to keep them in this service rather than service to God. Every time a Hmong person has a problem, Satan wants them searching out a shaman or seeking the guidance of a dead ancestor instead of finding the love of Christ and the truth of Scripture.

There is no doubt in my mind that Satan has a hold on the Hmong people. His noose is getting tighter and tighter each day. He is not only prowling around like a roaring lion, but he is actively pouncing on them and holding them down. That is why it is very important to know about their religion. That is why it is also important to know the Bible and what it says about the issues of Hmong religion. Knowing what the Bible says gives the Christian a point of reference and a place for answers.

Outreach to the Hmong is greatly needed. As Christians we need to respond to the Hmong religion with hearts of love. We also need to remember that when we reach out to others, it is all about Jesus. As active members in the Lord's kingdom, we respond in Christian love and reach out to the Hmong who greatly need to be reached. We do this because we know the difference Christ has made in our lives and we trust that it can make the same difference in the life of the Hmong community.

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<sup>84</sup> Interview #1 Question 6.

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## APPENDIX

### **Interview #1 – Christian Hmong Family**

**1. How would you describe the Hmong religion?** Hmong religion consists of Animism and Shamanism, the belief that a spiritual world coexists with the physical world. There are many spirits that causes illnesses such as ancestral spirits, house spirits, and spirits in the natural world. For example, natural or non-spiritual causes of illness are caused naturally by the environment such as the natural processes of life and aging; spiritual or religious causes of illness are associated with offending one's ancestors, nature, and evil spirits; and other causes of illness are caused by a broad range of things like curses such as wrong doing in which a curse is put on the wrongdoer. Shamans diagnose and treat the causes of illness by performing ritual ceremonies that entail animal sacrifices in order to calm down the various spirits and to cure illnesses. Our interpretation of Hmong religion: The process of worshipping and making sacrifices to one's ancestors in return for protection from evil spirits, good health, and good fortune.

**2. Is there any hope or comfort in Hmong religion?**

It depends on the individual and extent of belief. If one is a strong believer, there's certainly hope and comfort. Typically individuals feel hopeful, comforted, and healed after a shaman performs the shamanic ritual of negotiating and offering animal sacrifices to spirits in exchange for an individual's lost soul that has left one's body.

**3. Were you part of the traditional Hmong religion before becoming a Christian? If so, what was that like? (Tell me your story)**

Yes, our family practiced shamanism. Whenever someone became ill or injured such as car accidents, soul calling ceremonies were performed by a Shaman to help the individual get better. Every year during November or December (during Hmong New Year) we'd have to do ceremony to sweep out the old spirits and welcome the new spirits and it was always a challenge because we didn't know how to do it so we were dependent on the eldest brother to help us. We also had to invite the ancestors to eat whenever we had the Shaman perform any rituals and it was hard to learn all the rituals and customs of the religion.

**4. How would you compare your life before becoming a Christian to after becoming a Christian?**

Our life prior to becoming a Christian was very difficult in that whenever a family member was ill, we'd have to ask my mother and older brothers and sisters for assistance in securing a shaman to perform the healing ritual because we didn't know how to properly seek the Shaman's services. Further, the rituals were always costly because we had to make animal sacrifices such as chickens, pigs, or cows as well as properly thank and pay the Shaman for his/her services. Our life after becoming Christians is so much simpler because we do not have to worry anymore, especially having to learn the rituals and making appropriate sacrifices.

**5. How has your life changed?**

Our life has changed for the better. We are liberated from the bonds of spirits; we are freed from the spirits. Christianity has relieved us of our sacrificial duties to appease the spirits and do not have to constantly worry about offending the spirits. Our family is a lot closer now and more connected because we share the same belief.

**6. Where do you now find hope and comfort?**

We find hope and comfort in Jesus Christ and God. Whenever we are lost, sad, or scared, we talk to God through Jesus and ask for assistance, guidance, and forgiveness through prayers.

**7. In your opinion what are some ways that we can reach the Hmong people with Christ?**

The church can reach out by educating the Hmong about how Christ can liberate them from the bonds of the spirits. In particular, the younger generation who find it difficult to learn or carry on the traditions of the Hmong religion.

## **Interview #2: Hmong Pastor**

### **1. What is the best way to describe the Hmong religion? What makes up their religion?**

When you look at the Hmong religion it is tough to tell but the best way to describe their religion is in a way they do things. They are superstitious; they think of the way they worship and respect elders or their deceased ancestors. They depend upon the shaman. It might be from a different perspective as a culture but it intertwines together in the culture.

### **2. Where does the Hmong religion come from?**

When we talk about this-many of their religion adapts through different places and ethnic groups. They get this from heaven itself or as they claim. They think they get it from god himself. That god gave it to them, the unknown god even though they cannot say who it exactly is. They point to the heaven or sky and say god gave us this religion. To do and perform these things, especially the role of the shaman who plays the role of communicating between the living and the dead and the spirit world. They say that God gave it to them. It came from their nomadic group of people who traveled through different land and countries. That adapted it their religion and culture, from Vietnam to Laos to Thailand. It's a mixture of a lot of things. Like in Buddhism they bow down before Buddha, but they also go to the shaman and ask him to do certain things. They do not have any specific things. They say this is who we are and who we claim to be.

### **3. I've read that Hmong religion can be described as animism. What does that mean and what place does it have in Hmong culture?**

It's a difficult concept to dissect but I would say that it is a worshiping of ancestors who die and also a matter of consulting with a median who communicates with the spirit world and determine what is wrong with their life. It's a communication of what it going on in their life. It is a way of communicating with the spirit world.

### **4. What role does the Shaman play in Hmong religion and in society? How is it a negative thing especially when trying to reach out to them with the Gospel?**

I think he shaman is the major player in Hmong culture and society. Anything that goes wrong the first thing is to consult with the shaman and see what is going on. He is like an investigator who goes to the spiritual world to see what is going on and how they can fix the problem with that family. The shaman role is pretty high in the lives of the Hmong people because he can tell them what's wrong and how to fix it. He can also give them fortune and what kind of catastrophe can happen in the future. He is the major person in their culture.

He is somewhat like a pastor but this person that can communicate with the spirit world. You need to fix this or problems will come about you. It is a respectful thing. He sees what you need to fix. It can be a comforting but also a threatening thing at the same time. They will tell you something that you cannot see by the naked eye.

It is a difficult wall to break through. They claim the shaman can fix the problem in the same way a pastor can fix the problem. At the same time this shaman can detect what is going on and can fix that. It is like a doctor who can detect how bad the cancer is and you can dissect it out. When they look at the shaman they see someone who can see the specific problem and what caused it and how it can get rid of. As a pastor you teach them by the Word of God and you comfort them through the gospel. It is totally different because many times people say that the shaman says this and if I do it the problem is taken care of. As a pastor you teach them and pray that they look to Jesus Christ. I would say it is an



obstacle that can be a wall because they grew up in an environment that depends on the Shaman to solve the problem in their lives. To have them depend on the gospel it would be complicated for them to see the need.

**5. What do the Hmong believe about ancestor worship and why do they do it? How can it be a bad thing especially when trying to reach out to them with the Gospel?**

It's a respect and honor for the dead and they that good fortune will be blessed upon them. They believe that when your ancestor dies they have the ability to bless you. They have the ability to take away fortune and bring curses and different things. It is a major contributor who protects your crops and investments and everything you have in your life including your children. Ancestor worship is a major role with especially men. When your father dies you really have to heed his spirit and ask him to protect your family and bring you fortune. Wealth and good fortune comes from your ancestor. The major part is that I love my father and I do not want to bring disgrace to him. I want to worship him so that his spirit will not be a hungry ghost wandering around without a place to rest or a place to depend upon. I need to do this duty to my dead ancestors so I can worship them and bring lots of blessing to me. In the gospel it is a different track. To believe that gospel means to cut away from my relatives also I cut from worshiping them so I do not have any connection with my family that is a big obstacle.

**6. What do the Hmong people believe about life after death?**

The factor about heaven and hell is not discussed in the Hmong culture. They do not want to hear about hell. There are too many times where it has made people angry and fearful because they believe when you die you journey to this place with your ancestors. To describe this place as hungry, dark or cold makes it not a very pretty place but Hmong believe that when you die you journey to live with your ancestors in the other side. They do not want to plainly tell you in specifics which place it is. But it is a place where your relatives live. For us that is definitely hell but if you would tell them that it would bring animosity and argument. They will try to fight it so it can defend their own beliefs.

**7. We believe that Jesus has taken away our sin and saved us from death and hell. Do the Hmong people believe in a Savior?**

The Hmong people do not have any savior. The major role is to believe the shaman when you are sick and he will try to heal you and that is it. When you die there is no such thing as heaven or hell. When you die you travel to be with your ancestor. Beyond that I think one of the major concepts that many people do not want to argue is that when you die you travel to be with your ancestors. The concept that in a couple months you release the spirit so that they can be born again and reincarnated and what about the person who is hungry you need to feed them. How many fathers do you have? Those are things they cannot answer. They do not want to talk about it because they say we do not know. The only thing we do know is that when you die you go to your ancestor. But what about the one who has already been born again. 18 years they become a young man or woman again. How come you are still feeding your ancestors if they are already born again? How many fathers do you have. They do not have any specific savior at all. When you are living they do anything they can to help ease the pain of the person alive. When you die there is no savior. You became a spirit to travel to your ancestors and that is it.

**8. How does the Hmong religion hold people in fear? What is there to fear in the Hmong religion?**

Many people do not see it that way. They see it as a religion for the nation. It is something they have to show other people they have something to worship or praise about. In a way from that perspective. From the fear perspective they really fear demons and ghosts and things that you do. If you do them right you will be saved and be credited as a good worshiper or as a good servant. But if you do it wrong. The chance of punishment goes up. The fear of misfortune if they are not respectful or if they are not worshipping or what the demons want them to do. It is something that is fearful from that perspective. You better please them if not they will cause you pain and catastrophe, death or misfortune. That I would consider is misfortune and fear.

**9. What have you found to be the best way to evangelize to the Hmong communities? How can they be reached?**

I think based on their religion and their kinship and community that they gather around it is very difficult to reach out to them. The gospel itself, the Word itself and the power of the gospel with the Holy Spirit. God has his own purpose to reach out to this people so God in his timing will call and collect individual people from this community to believe in Jesus Christ. What I found is that when people try their shaman and their religion to fix their problem for a long time and if their problem is not going away they will like to try Christianity and Jesus Christ. At the same time when problems are not solved through shaman then they may consult the pastor for counseling and the Gospel. The Bible is Scripture is really good at telling people what to do and not to do. It tells people about sin and grace. Things like that can help this individual people look to the Scripture to teach about life and a change of live with peace and grace. This is what we try to do. But what the most interesting part is that the Holy Spirit is the one who works and converts people in his own time. Overall when people have trouble it is not a bad thing because they try the shaman or a doctor but Jesus will be the last thing they try.

**10. Why have so many Hmong settled in the Midwest (Wisconsin and Minnesota)?**

The Hmong settled in the mid-west because of the education, public assistant from government and job availability. The main purpose I see was that the first relatives or sponsor was the main concern here. If the sponsor lives in MN, for example, he/she will be able to sponsor the Hmong directly to that state. But, when the Hmong came to American, they could like in different states based on where the sponsors have lived but the Hmong have connection with their relatives or Hmong people which encourage them to move to be together as a community. Most Hmong came to MN and WI because of kinship, job, education, government support.

### **Interview #3: Hmong Pastor**

#### **1. What is the best way to describe the Hmong religion? What makes up their religion?**

Hmong religion has to do with the soul or the spirit. You also have to worship the spirits. You have ancestor worship and shamanism which deal with the soul and spirit after life. They deal with the spiritual world.

#### **2. Where does the Hmong religion come from?**

This is what I believe it is, wherever we have lived our religion has adapted from that place. When I look at Hmong religion I see a little part of it from China and Thailand and Laos. And now you come to America it has changed a little bit because you cannot always do what you used to.

#### **3. I've read that Hmong religion can be described as animism. What does that mean and what place does it have in Hmong culture?**

Animism has to deal with the soul or the spirit. Everything is surrounded by that. As Christians if we have something wrong we pray to God. The same thing for the Hmong if something happens to you, you can always pray to your ancestor or the person you look up to. But mostly they look up to their elders who pass away.

#### **4. What role does the Shaman play in Hmong religion and in society? How is it a negative thing especially when trying to reach out to them with the Gospel?**

They play a big role in the Hmong religion. He is the mediator between the physical world and the spiritual world. In their society his value is really high. It is like in our Christian life where the pastor is valued. He is the main guy. Anything you do you have to go through him because he is supposed to know everything.

It is still hard to figure out how shamanism hurts ministry. I do know that it has always been a problem because they have always been taught that. You have to honor and respect him. For example if you have the shaman over to talk about something and tells you what not to do so trouble doesn't come on your family and you don't listen to him then something bad will happen. The shaman will then say see I told you so. It has always in a sense scared people. They are warning people and telling them what to do. They are slaves to them and they have the rope on our neck and say this is what you are supposed to do.

#### **5. What do the Hmong believe about ancestor worship and why do they do it? How can it be a bad thing especially when trying to reach out to them with the Gospel?**

That is a tough question and even I have to ask the older generation. This is what I have figured out. We worship those who passed away. The Hmong believe the when your ancestor dies the go to a place where you are born that everyone goes there in our family. In the spiritual world, they are hungry and need food so then they make their family on earth sick. The shaman will come and see that their ancestors are hungry and that if you sacrifice to them everything will be okay. In a way you worship them. Every New Year's you do a dinner and you have to feed the ancestors and if they get what they need your house will be blessed. I know that if one of my parents passed away they would never come back and do anything to make my kids sick.

Ancestor Worship is difficult because we grow up in this religion where you respect your elder and family is everything. But when you go to Christianity you cut that tie between that relationship and your ancestor. That is one of the big things that a lot of people do not want to do. Especially the idea of heaven and hell. The old tradition says that when you die you have to go a spend time with your

ancestors and work with them. That tie with the ancestors and their fathers is hard to break. When they die they want to go with them and see them.

**6. What do the Hmong people believe about life after death?**

When you die you will go to live with your ancestors. For us they would say we would go back to China, where we originally came from. Everyone will know each other and work on the farms. Why would I want to do that when I can go to heaven?

**7. We believe that Jesus has taken away our sin and saved us from death and hell. Do the Hmong people believe in a Savior?**

I do not think they believe in a Savior but I do think they believe in a bigger power. They call him Shee Yee. He is the man who fought the devil and destroyed evil. I do not if you could call him a savior. When you call a shaman his power comes from Shee Yee. So whatever the shaman does he would use the name of See Yee.

**8. How does the Hmong religion hold people in fear? What is there to fear in the Hmong religion?**

It depends on who you are. It can be seen differently depending on if you are a Christian or a Hmong. If you believe in the old way you do not think that. But it is always like having that rope around your neck. You have to listen, you have to sacrifice. From a Christian perspective there is only God and his angels or the devil and his demons. In this case they are not angels from God but rather from Satan. They are holding them in fear by saying you have to worship these things. If you listen to me I will not let the bad thing happen to you but if you do not listen the rope will get so tight that you can't breathe. It is a mean of using other people to control them. The power is given to the Hmong people to control the shaman. In a way it is like worshipping Satan or the demon.

**9. What have you found to be the best way to evangelize to the Hmong communities?**

I always apply it to myself. If someone would do evangelism to me as a non-Christian how would they do it? Coming from eight years of school you have so much that you want to tell everyone and tell them this is how it is. You want to say what I believe is true and your belief isn't. You need to take the time to get to know them and their story and background. That is what we tend to make a lot of mistakes. We have to remember it is cross-cultural. It is harder for the Hmong because we are already two hundred years behind the Anglo. It is hard because they believe in the Hmong tradition. The best way is to just be there for them.

## **Interview #4: Hmong Pastor**

### **1. What is the best way to describe the Hmong religion?**

Hmong religion is Animism – Hmong people believe and worship Ancestral Spirits, House Spirits, Spirit in Nature and Evil Spirits (Satan/Serpent).

### **2. Where does the Hmong religion come from?**

It's hard to say where it come from but according to every Hmong family they believe that it is a traditional believe that their ancestors believed and did more than thousand years.

“While there is no standardization in Hmong religious rituals and practices, Hmong rituals usually revolved around the practices that their ancestors passed onto them. Clan and lineage variations also are prevalent between and within individual clans as practices are traditional passed down from generation to generation through oral tradition.”

### **3. I've read that Hmong religion can be described as animism. What does that mean and what place does it have in Hmong culture?**

Yes! The Hmong are animist, people who believe in souls or spirits, in their practice of religion. The Hmong believe that the spiritual world coexist with the physical world. The spirit world consists of many types of spirits that influences the human life. Some types of spirits are ancestral spirits, household spirits, spirits in nature, and evil spirits.

### **4. What role does the Shaman play in Hmong religion and in society? How is it a negative thing especially when trying to reach out to them with the Gospel?**

Shaman is the leader in Hmong religion like “Mediator between man/Spirit's world”, performing ritual to find the cause of illness, Sacrifice animal to redeem sin, cure illness, and chase away the evil spirits. Without a Shaman Hmong religion is paralyze.

Shamanism is a way to maintain communication with the spiritual world. Spirits of nature are believed to possibly cause physical and mental harm to Hmong in the disguise of illness, nightmares, and even death. To figure out the illness shamans perform rituals so they can find a proper treatment.

In every village there is at least one shaman. To be a shaman one is chosen by the spirits. It doesn't matter what age or sex to become a shaman. When chosen the person goes through a long illness and must accept his/her fate as a shaman. If s/he refuses s/he will remain ill. Each shaman has ‘teacher spirits’ who instruct him or her how to perform.

When a shaman cures a sick person s/he goes into a trance and veils his eyes with a black cloth to see the spirits. S/he sits on a bench and faces the altar. Then calls his/her teacher spirits to come cure the patient.

A sickness can be caused when one's soul is lost, captured by evil spirits, or offending an ancestral spirit. The shaman will discuss with ancestral spirits who may have been offended by the sick person and see what the spirits will ask for from the living. Shamans may bargain and struggle with wild spirits who have captured the patient's soul, or locate the lost soul and persuade or force the soul back to its body.

Helping spirits differ in power and abilities. So when a shaman is unable to help the family they will look for a more powerful shaman. Hiring a shaman can be very expensive and cost the family a large

portion of their resources.

**5. What do the Hmong believe about ancestor worship and why do they do it? How can it be a bad thing especially when trying to reach out to them with the Gospel?**

They believe that their ancestors will protect them from illness and provide them with prosperity. Why do the Hmong people do that (believe their ancestors), because every generation had been told to do so by their ancestors.

It is not easy to reach out to the Hmong people because we are being accused of worshipping the Western world's god, and ideology. We are being accused of destroying the tradition, custom, and even the spiritual ceremonies that the ancestors had been doing more than thousand years.

**6. What do the Hmong people believe about life after death?**

It is sad when we (Hmong people talk about life after death) because every non-Christian Hmong family talks about reunited with their ancestors in hell. Hell is the only choice or way that all Hmong people will go after death. Hmong people do not believe that there is a hope for heaven. So Hmong Present life is to enjoy and have a happy life!

Hmong people also believe that heaven will be established when the future king comes – this is earthly kingdom; peace, joy, immortality, and all nations will be one. So many Hmong live according to the prophesy and wait that the day of peace, joy, and happiness, forever and ever will comes.

Hmong also believe in afterlife. With proper guidance from Hmong musical performers during the funeral rituals, the souls of the deceased will come back to their ancestors for reincarnation.

**7. We believe that Jesus has taken away our sin and saved us from death and hell. Do the Hmong people believe in a Savior?**

No! The Hmong do not believe that the Savior has taken away their sin and give them a hope of heaven. They only believe what had been told or did by their ancestors. If you told them about Jesus Christ the Savior – their response is who is Jesus Christ and who care! We believe what our ancestors believed.

**8. Does the Hmong religion hold the Hmong people in fear? If so, how does it do this?**

Yes! Hmong people live a life of fear. Fear what? Fear that the ancestors will curse or bring illness and disaster to the family if they do not do or follow what their ancestors did and told. Also the Hmong people fear the evil spirit. That is why the Hmong people have to sacrifice (animals) to the evil spirits every year.

Traditional Hmong life is believe to be affected by contact with supernatural beings. A person is thought to have been selected time on earth by god and receives documents to come to earth as part of a given family and clan. Ritual ceremonies are performed for the reason of pleasing the ancestral spirits. If they are pleased, they will protect the believer's descendants from illness and natural disasters.

**9. What have you found to be the best way to evangelize to the Hmong communities?**

The best way is to spread the seed of the gospel in the heart of the Hmong people and pray that the Holy Spirit will shower the seed of the gospel to sprout and grow.

We are sinner and flesh, we cannot overcome the power of the evil but only through the power of the gospel that can penetrate through the heart of the Hmong people and believe the Savior.

How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom

they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring Good News of good things” (Romans 10: 14-15 NASB).

For I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law (1 Cor. 9:19-20 NASB).

Sharing the good news of Christ to the lost souls is the only perfect love that can be attained by man – through Christ.

## **Interview #5: Hmong Pastor**

### **1. What is the best way to describe the Hmong religion? What makes up their religion?**

Animism is probably the best way to describe the overall belief of the Hmong people since they believed and worshipped spirits, but often time the word Shamanism is used to describe the Hmong religion. These two terms are somewhat similar, but they have their differences. The similarity between them is that they both deal with spirits, and the difference is that one is the actual belief and the other is the practice. It's confusing, but let me try to explain what each term means.

What is animism? It is a belief that everything in nature has a spirit ranging from living things to non-living things. Let me give you some examples. Hmong believe that a rock has its own spirit so do a tree, a mountain, a river, an ocean and so on. Each of these spirits can either be good or bad depending on the circumstances. If permission is not granted and a person stumbled onto one of these spirits lair, they can harm the human body and health. The kind of harm they can inflict is by taking away the human spirit. When that happened the person becomes ill. The Hmong believe that the reason a person gets sick is because his or her spirit is wandering away or no longer present inside the physical body. If the illness is left untreated or the body spirit isn't brought back it can result is death. At this point is where the term Shamanism comes into play. What is Shamanism? It is the ritual in which the shaman priest performs to cure the illness of the sick. The shaman is the mediator between the physical and spirit world. He has the ability to enter into the spirit world and find out the cause of the sickness. Once the problem is found, he will try to patch it up through negotiation with the spirit. Through the process of negotiation the Shaman will ask the spirit the ransom at which it is willing to release the captive human spirit. When the deal has reached animals such as cow, pig, dog, cats, ducks and chickens are used for the sacrificial purposes along with the burning of the spirit money.

What I just described is only a portion of the Hmong religion. The other portion deals with the house spirits and the ancestral spirits. These two types of spirits are being worship by the Hmong. They are the guardians and their soul purposes are to keep the family safe from evil spirits. Whenever something bad is going to happen to the family these spirits give some kind of signs so they can know and avoid it. Whenever there is any kind of celebration going on the Hmong family would call on these good spirits and have them join the feast. They are food set aside for the ancestral spirits.

### **2. Where does the Hmong religion come from?**

No one really knows where or how the Hmong acquires their religion that is because no one is certain of the Hmong origin. There are just too many accounts of where the Hmong came from. Some said Hmong came from the Chaldean, some said Siberia, and other said Easter China. According to some anthropologists, they believed that Hmong religion might have existed for 5,000 years. The Hmong known as Miao in China was the first group of people to settle in China and that religion had been with them since the time of dawn. Today there are around 10 million of the Miao people including the Hmong still practice Animism/Shamanism as the main form of religion.

### **3. What role does the Shaman play in Hmong religion and in society? How is it a negative thing especially when trying to reach out to them with the Gospel?**

In the Hmong community shaman is the spiritual healer and sometime the medicine man. The Hmong come to him or her whenever they are sick both physically and spiritually. Now a day there are still many Hmong who would seek the shaman first and western medicine second.

The Shamans are spiritual leader and to tell them about the Gospel would mean a clash of belief. Shamans believe their powers are given to them by the god of the heavenly sky to help the Hmong



people and to tell them that their work can't save like that of Christ means we are disrespecting them. For the most part that would lead to argument or tension because they do not believe God's Word is true, but rather ideas composed by scholars.

#### **4. What do the Hmong believe about ancestor worship and why do they do it? How can it be a bad thing especially when trying to reach out to them with the Gospel?**

Hmong believe that their ancestors are the ones that protect them and that is the reason why they are being worship. The Hmong do not believe that God is the creator. They believe that the reason they come to existence is because their parents gave birth to them. To tell the Hmong not to worship their ancestors, but Christ meant that we are disrespecting them and their ancestors.

#### **5. Can you describe a Hmong funeral for me? What do the Hmong people believe about life after death?**

##### The Pre Funeral

The funeral is the most elaborate of all Hmong rituals. The overall goal of the performed rituals is to guide the soul back to the placental jacket that it will wear on the journey to the afterlife (Conquergood, par. 6). After death the body is bathed by the sons or daughters of the deceased while extended family members are notified and begin to travel to the home of the dead relative (Tapp 81). After the body is washed it is dressed in only new ceremonial burial clothes. The deceased is dressed accordingly to their sex for the ceremony.

Another important aspect of burial clothing is the hand-made hemp shoes that help the soul across the caterpillar river and over the green worm mountain on the quest for their ancestors ("Death").

##### Music

Music is also used as a tool for helping the soul on the journey to the afterlife. The first song played is called, "Showing The Way" and illustrates the origins of man and the world, which must be revisited for the soul to pass to its next life. Once the body is prepared for its journey it is positioned on a table with items that will be necessary for the voyage into the afterlife. "A bottle of alcohol and a cooked chicken in the two halves of a gourd, together with a boiled egg, a crossbow, a knife and a paper umbrella, will be placed by the head of the corpse" (Tapp 83). Incense serves a dual purpose in the presentation of the body. It is not only an offering but also masks the smell of the decaying body and is set at the feet of the deceased (Tapp 83).

##### Length

Funerals in the Hmong culture can last anywhere from three to twelve days depending on a number of variables. The main factor in determining the length of the funeral is the person's status within the community. For instance, the head of the village would have a twelve-day funeral (Tapp 83). Another variable that alters the length of the funerals is present day laws. Western laws regarding treatment of cadavers and animal sacrificing have resulted in a change from the traditional ceremony (Falk, par. 12). The final variable concerning funeral duration is the way in which the deceased has passed. For infants and victims of violent deaths the body is disposed of with haste and little fuss because there are strong beliefs among the Hmong people that these deaths create negative spirits (Tapp 81).

An essential part of the mourning process is the three daily meals prepared by the men in the family. At each meal the ceremonial dish, laig dab that is composed of pork and rice, is offered to the deceased body by the eldest son, while the reed pipe instrument, called the geej, plays a ceremonial song (Tapp 84). Another offering made to the spirit of the deceased is a daily animal sacrifice. Traditionally, the sacrifice has been a pig, however due to local laws it is often replaced with a chicken (Falk, par. 12).

Once the offerings have been finished a lamp is lit on the dead body and male relatives retreat outside to fire three shots into the air to scare any evil spirits that may attack the house during this time of turmoil (“Death”).

Reincarnation is a pillar of the Hmong faith. During the ceremonies it is culturally taboo to show distress, as the ceremony is not about the death of the person but the rebirth of the soul and a new life (Goetz, par. 12). The main reason the funeral rituals are performed is so that the dead will be reborn into the same family. If the rituals are not performed properly the Hmong fear that the soul will be punished by returning as a lesser form or in a different family (Tapp 84). One ritual that must be completed is the payment of the deceased debts. Any debts unpaid are thought to negatively impact the living family along with the deceased party (“Death”). The final ritual before the burial is the second sacred song. This song is called, “The Song of Expiring Life” and informs the deceased they have passed on and need to begin the journey to the placental jacket and into the spirit world (Cha 73).

### The Burial

In the Hmong culture a death is an extremely important event. The burial process must be performed correctly in order to protect those living and the deceased from evil spirits that are present when there is a death. The first step in burial is sacrificing a number of oxen that are prepared by the descendents of the deceased for a feast that the entire village partakes in to pay homage to the dead (“Death”). The second step is removing the body from the house on a stretcher while “Song of Mounting The Way” is being played on the qeej (Tapp 84, 86, 87). A female from the village will then guide the funeral procession with a torch to “light the way” for the corpse (Tapp 85). Along the way the procession takes steps to confuse the evil spirits. This includes stopping, changing course frequently and disposing of the torch before the burial site is reached (“Death”). The traditional burial site is on the side of a mountain where the body is placed facing west. This is because Hmong people believe that west is the direction of death and if the head is facing the east it will be blinded by the sun (Tapp 86). The placement of the grave is determine by older members of the community and depends on age, sex, and status (Tapp 85 & “Death”). Once the body has been laid in the ground and covered the stretcher used to transport the deceased to the burial site is destroyed while on lookers burn incense, symbolic paper and place stones on the grave (Tapp 85 & Falk 11). The final step of the burial is to construct a fence around the grave that protects the site from any harm (“Death”). The celebration will continue on the way back to the village and throughout the next three days through performing a variety of rituals that vary from tribe to tribe all with intent to honor the deceased (Tapp 85).

### Post Burial

There is a thirteen-day mourning period in which the family of the deceased observes certain sacrifices in respect of the passed loved one. On this day a ritual is performed with intent to welcome the soul into its former home one last time before it begins the journey into the afterlife (Tapp 87).

The soul (or recently deceased person) could also be reborn as the next child in the family through the males. Because of this, males in the family of that deceased person must not impregnate a woman between the burial day and the next two years. If they do, they must marry the female otherwise the child won't be born into the male's family, and they will lose that family member forever.

### Showing the Way

Sho, hey! Your Ancestors will say: "Who showed you the way here?"

You will answer: 'It was a fellow With a face as big as a fan and eyes like saucers, Feet like ox's hooves and taking up as much room as an ox when he lies down'.

Your Ancestors will say next: "How Can we follow his tracks? If we call him, will he hear? Will we

be able to catch him up on horseback?'

'You must say: 'He can hear no call. He led me here this year. And left again last year. He can hear no call'.

Your Ancestors will say: 'Well can't we follow his tracks?'

'You must answer: 'No one can follow his tracks; The weather was dry when he came, when he left, it was raining And his tracks were all washed away'.

You must say: 'When he came, the reeds parted like swords The leaves of the grass parted like spearheads Now he's gone, the reeds are stock still, the grass blocks the way, unmoving.

Partridges and pheasants scratched the ground, leaves cover the path.

No one can find his tracks; no one can catch him up on horseback.

Partridges and pheasants pecking at the leaves must have covered his tracks'.

You will say: 'He sent me this year, he left again last year.

He can hear no call'.

You will say that when you came you had shoes and you crossed a bridge, He had no shoes, he came by the mountain road and left again over the slippery rocks.

You will say you can see if the water is clear, but not if the water is muddy (Lemoine 1983:38-39).

## **6. We believe that Jesus has taken away our sin and saved us from death and hell. Do the Hmong people believe in a Savior? If not, what do they believe about their soul and salvation?**

Hmong do not have a person whom they called as their savior, but do believe that there is a place called ancestral land and that is where all the deceased souls would eventually end up. The souls would live there forever until they are to be reborn again as human being.

## **7. How does the Hmong religion hold people in fear?**

The thing that frightened Hmong the most is evil spirits or demons. The reason is that evil spirits are thought to be the cause of all sicknesses and death. If one is too careless chances are he might have to spend a lot of money calling the shaman to perform the rituals to reunite his spirits with the body or the other way around is have to die and leave the family behind.

## **8. What have you found to be the best way to evangelize to the Hmong communities?**

Trying to evangelize the Hmong is still a difficult and challenging process. The majority of them do not like the idea of switching religion. Animism or Shamanism had been practiced by the Hmong for centuries and to adopt another form of religion such as Christianity mean you are dishonoring your ancestors. By dishonoring that means you will not have a good life on earth. This is one reason why the Hmong are reluctant to become Christians. Hmong do not believe that God created them. Their human natures tell them that their parents gave them birth and not God so in order to share about God the first thing one must do is establish trust otherwise they would be pissed off. It doesn't mean that once you establish the trust the Hmong are more likely to listen to the Word and become Christians, but it opens up the opportunity.

Along the same line of trust is by have a good reputation in the community. When people know that you are a good person they are more likely to listen to you. Another thing is by being a reliable person. In the Hmong community, the Hmong often depend on their clan leader, elders and the clan itself for support, but when one decides to be a Christian he no longer has support from the clan and any of the members within that clan. So when the Hmong Christians are searching for a church they also look for a reliable pastor. By having a reliable pastor that means no matter what happen, the pastor will always be there.

There are different methods on how to reach out to the Hmong. I found that by attending Hmong

celebration or gathering parties, funerals and weddings is a great way of getting to know people and share the message of God.

## **Interview #6: Hmong Pastor**

### **1. What is the best way to describe the Hmong religion? What makes up their religion?**

The Hmong religion is a mixed religion composed of mainly shamanism and animism.

- a) The Hmong worship their dead ancestors –they believe their dead ancestors partake in their daily lives. The dead ones can bless them, or cause them to be sick. Therefore, if one expects to have a good life, he/she needs to sacrifice offerings to the dead as needed. But how can one know that the dead ancestors need sacrifices or offerings? Through a shaman. A shaman is a mediator between the dead (spirit world) and the living. For example, when someone is sick, the family will call a shaman. He/she will perform a ceremony to retrieve the souls of the dead (the Hmong believe that the Shaman can talk with the dead). After the ceremony, the shaman will let the family know what offerings they need to sacrifice. It could be a pig, a cow, or paper money as incentives, etc.
- b) They worship trees, animals, spirits, etc. (Like animism).

Shamanism makes up most of the religion. The Hmong do yearly sacrificial offerings to the dead ancestors to ask for their blessings and protection, but they cannot determine what to offer until the shaman has communicated with the dead spirits.

### **2. Where does the Hmong religion come from?**

There are two main beliefs of the origin of the Hmong religion.

- a). Some believe the Hmong adopted the worship of dead ancestors from the Chinese but mixed it with Shamanism.
- b). Most Hmong believe that Shamanism was given by god – The word god in Hmong sounds similar to the word “Yahweh” in Hebrew. This is one of the reasons why the Hmong believe they may have been a part of the Jewish people, or was exposed to the Jewish culture. The Hmong also has a ritual of sin offerings every year, very similar to the scapegoat in the Old Testament.

### **3. I've read that Hmong religion can be described as animism. What does that mean and what place does it have in Hmong culture?**

Yes, you can describe the Hmong religion as animism because they believe that souls exist in everything. For example, before my family became Christians (or believed in Christ), my father's name was Neng. But my grandfather renamed him after to a big rock –Xaoze because of his health issues. Xaoze means: big rock will protect you. My grandfather believed that the soul (spirit) of the big rock could protect Neng from his health issues and bless him.

### **4. What role does the Shaman play in Hmong religion and in society? How is it a negative thing especially when trying to reach out to them with the Gospel?**

The shaman is the mediator between the (dead) spirit world and the living world (refer to above). The Hmong unbelievers usually accuse the Hmong believers of betraying the ancestors and worshiping the Western god.

### **5. What do the Hmong believe about ancestor worship and why do they do it? How can it be a bad thing especially when trying to reach out to them with the Gospel?**

As stated above, they believe that the dead ancestor can bless and protect them. In order for someone to have a good life on earth, they need to respect and worship their dead ancestors.

**6. What is a Hmong funeral like? What do the Hmong people believe about life after death?**

The key point in a Hmong funeral is to send the dead to live with their ancestors. They believe that their ancestors live in hell. The Hmong do know about heaven, but they only believe in an earthly heaven. They believe that one day the Hmong king will step down from heaven to establish his kingdom on earth (very similar the prophecy of the Messiah). The earthly kingdom is a kingdom of eternity –no sickness, no suffering, and everyone will live forever. The king will be the ruler for all nations and tribes. (I usually compare the Hmong belief to the coming of Jesus Christ).

Right after someone dies, the family will call the soul director (tus qhuab ke), and he will direct the soul of the dead to hell. Whether the dead one wants to go or not, he/she has no choice, they have to go because their ancestors are already there.

This is a summary of what the soul director says during the ceremony.

He says to the dead –You are not welcome on earth. I called you but you did not answer me, I woke you up but you did not wake up, therefore you have to go to the place where your ancestors live. The place where they live is a place of suffering –with boiling water, fire, and worms. They are very hungry, so when you go, please take some food with you so that your ancestors can have something to eat. On the way there, if your rooster crows and someone’s rooster crows in response to yours, they are not your ancestors. Only the roosters that do not crow in response will be your ancestors. Your ancestors have eyes the size of a cup, and ears of a fan (which means Satan).

After the soul director says the above words, he tells the dead one: if they ask you about me, tell them that he came yesterday and already left today. Do not follow him, you cannot chase after him. (The reason he says these words is because he does not want the dead spirits to chase after him).

The Hmong also believe in incarnation, but this theory was adopted from Buddhism. In reality, the Hmong do not believe in incarnation. As stated above, if they believed in incarnation, there would be no need to send every dead person to the place of suffering to meet their ancestors.

**7. We believe that Jesus has taken away our sin and saved us from death and hell. Do the Hmong people believe in a Savior?** Only the Hmong believers believe that Christ has taken away their sin. The nonbelievers do not believe that Christ is God, and they do not believe that he can take away their sin. They send all the unbelievers’ souls to the place of suffering. There is no hope for salvation, but they will await the future king who will rule all nations and tribes forever.

**8. What is there to fear in the Hmong religion?**

a). The Hmong religion holds the Hmong in fear because all unbelievers have no choice. They have to go to the place of suffering –the place of fire, boiling water, and many big worms. There is no hope for heaven, and salvation –whether the dead one likes or not, he/she has to go to hell.

b). They are under a curse of the law or under the power of Satan. Everything in their life is involved with the evil spirits. The Hmong are very superstitious, if someone is sick or trips, he/she needs to call the shaman to perform a ceremony to retrieve the soul back to the body. The consequence of not retrieving the soul back to the body is death. Every time the shaman performs a ceremony, it usually costs a lot of money. In my father and grandfather’s generations, many families had to sell their children to another family because of the cost of the shaman ceremonies.

## **Interview #7: Hmong Pastor**

### **1. What is the best way to describe the Hmong religion?**

The best way to describe the Hmong religion will be spirit and ancestral worship. The reason I said this is because the Hmong believe there is a spirit in all we do and places we go to. The spirit of the forest, land, house, etc. Hmong people are very cautious not to disturb these spirits. Hmong people also worship ancestors that have past. The dead will come back in dreams or in illness to the family if Hmong families do not worship or burn paper money to them. This is where the Medicine man (shaman) comes into play. They are the ones who are able to connect with the other world. After they perform their ritual they will tell the family what they need to do. If it is the ancestors looking for help the shaman will let the family know what they need to do and how much they need to burn or sacrifice.

### **2. Where does their religion come from? What makes up their religion?**

The Hmong people have no written history. Story that are still being told is that we are descendants of the Chinese or even the Mongolians up north of china. There are conversations that the Hmong religion has picked up a few now practice from other cultures. The makeup of the religion will have to be honoring and respecting the spirits that have past.

### **3. I've read that Hmong religion can be described as animism. What does that mean and what place does it have in Hmong culture?**

Yes, you can call it animism. Hmong people do believe that there is a spirit in all things such as rocks, trees, land, house, forest and places you visit. Similar to the Native American Indians I think. When a person gets sick they will call the shaman (man or women) to perform the ritual and for the most part it is a spirit problem. The sick person has gone to some place and lost their spirit or has disturb some other spirit.

### **4. What role does the Shaman play in Hmong religion and in society? How is it a negative thing especially when trying to reach out to them with the Gospel?**

The Shaman is a highly respected person in the community. Many Shamans believe they are able to heal many problems. They are able to connect to the spirit world and Hmong families that still believe the traditional ways have high honor for them.

To reach out to them with the Gospel is possible. There are many Hmong Christians that are former shaman. The ones that are still doing it will be more defensive of the religion but it doesn't hurt to share the Gospel with. Its just picking and choosing which time is the best time to share.

### **5. What do the Hmong believe about ancestor worship and why do they do it? How can it be a bad thing especially when trying to reach out to them with the Gospel?**

Hmong people believe that when you past you live in another world. A world not similar to Heaven or Hell. A place like on earth. There you still need things to keep you going. That is why when a person dies at the funeral they will kill many cows and chicken to also offer to the died to bring along with them on their journey to the other world. When that person runs out of things and need things they will come back and dreams to tell or have someone in the house becomes sick. This in turns will let them know that they have to burn more paper money or do what they have to do to satisfy the spirit.

-Many time when Christians address these kind of issue with people who still believe in this. It comes across as mocking them. This a sensitive issue and need the most care to choose our words carefully.

When we do we can share the Gospel to them and share that it is not their love ones spirit that is coming back but evil spirit.

**6. What do the Hmong people believe about life after death?**

-Hmong people do believe that there is life after death. There is a place that you will have to go to. During the beginning part of a funeral service there is what we call a translation in English ( tau kev) ” the one who appoints the way”. That person will lead the decease back to where he or she came from. Back to the birthplace and then on the journey to the other world and then to a place to meet the relatives that have past before them.

**7. We believe that Jesus has taken away our sin and saved us from death and hell. Do the Hmong people believe in a Savior?**

Hmong people have no Savior. Hmong people believe that our time on earth if you want good things to happen to you, you do good things. Karma. Hmong people believe that there is a God that watches over all. To have a Savior like Christ that died on the cross to take away the sins of the world, No.

**8. How does the Hmong religion hold people in fear? What is there to fear in the Hmong religion?**

Fear does not come from the religion itself. It comes the community and relatives that hold on to the religion. They will say since you are a Christian do not come to us for help. We are no longer a family because you have left the religion. It is the fear or backlash from living that makes people fear. Sons fear fathers and mothers. They are no longer going to accept them if they become Christians. Father and mothers do all they can in their powers to not let their children’s to become Christian because they will not get animal and paper money burnt to them when they die.

**9. Final question. What have you found to be the best way to evangelize to the Hmong communities?**

To not force the Gospel on them. Shares as you can and let the Holy Spirit do its magic. Many will hate us because we are Christians but they will keep an eye on us and seek our help when the time comes. Befriends with them and they will one day ask about Christ and this will open up a door to share with them. To live our live that reflects God so they can see through us. This is the best way I have found evangelize to them. Not to give in into what they are doing but to show love when I can.



## **Interview #8: Hmong Pastor**

**In your opinion, what is the best way to reach the Hmong? How can we bring them Christ?**

It depends on the region.

The Hmong who live in some countries such as Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam are different from the ones in the U.S. When you share the gospel with them, it is very necessary to prove the love of God through humanitarian aids but for the Hmong in the US, humanitarian aids may not work.

These are my suggestions:

1). We need to produce some materials to tackle the Hmong religions. For example, the animal that the Hmong does offer yearly for sins offering. Try to compare the portrait the animal in the picture to Christ, Or the Hmong king as well. Recently I got one of my translation published my Multi-language Publication. I received positive feedback from the Hmong community oversea.

2). Radio Broadcasting - In the US, not only the Hmong believers listen to Hmong Christian radio but the unbelievers also listen. For example, more than 80% of the Hmong believers in China and Vietnam believe in Christ through radio work. They never see a missionary, or a preacher, or a pastor. All they hear and know is through the radio work.

3). 75% of those who come to church are reached out to by family members, not the pastors. So I think we need to train the members to be evangelists.

4). The Hmong New Year festival is also a very good opportunity to share the work with the nonbelievers. The believers and nonbelievers may be divided in many things but they are unified during the New Year celebration. My congregation uses this opportunity to invite the community to celebrate the New Year, and at the same time I share the word with them. Last year two families were added to my congregation through Hmong New Year festival -to hear the word and believe Christ is there Savior.

5). Laying hand for the sick (even though some of us in the WEL's do not believe in laying to heal the sick, but since the Hmong come from a background of shamanism it is a good opportunity to share the word by laying hand on the sick). Yes, the pastor has no power to heal the sick, only through the power of God but if he has the opportunity to lay hands on the sick it is a good time to share the word with them. Many of the Hmong see the pastor as a shaman, who performs miracles to heal the sick.