

“To Follow the New Rule or Way”:
Hmong Refugee Resettlement and the Practice of American Religious Pluralism

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation explores the impact of refugee migration and American refugee resettlement policies on the religious lives of Hmong refugees resettled in the United States between 1976 and 1990. Despite efforts to make refugee assistance a secular and religiously neutral enterprise, resettlement placed pressure for religious conformity on Hmong refugees and set in motion several changes in Hmong religious life. First, refugee resettlement imposed pressures on the practice of indigenous Hmong religion. Second, refugee resettlement facilitated Hmong adoption of Christianity, which Hmong people incorporated into their religious lives for their own purposes and in their own ways. Finally, Hmong people adapted and reinvented their indigenous beliefs and practices, as well as its institutions and identifications, in order to preserve their indigenous religious traditions.

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For Francisco and Eleanor Borja

Introduction

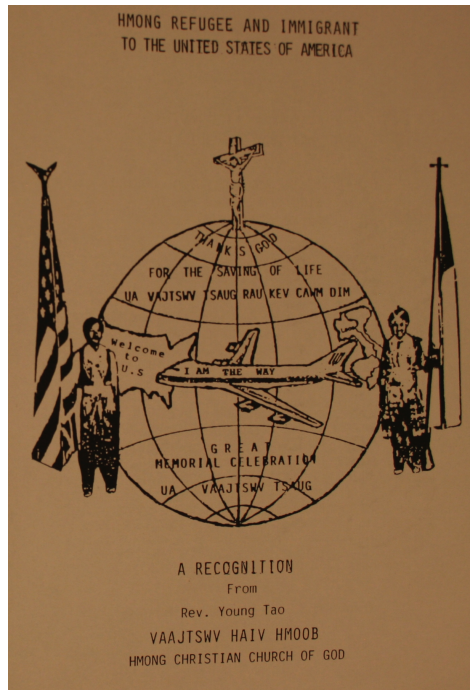


Figure One: “I Am the Way”

Source: Refugee Studies Center Records, Immigration History Research Center

At the center of the program cover for the Hmong Christian Church of God’s “great memorial celebration” was an airplane. Superimposed on the outline of the globe, the oversized jetliner appeared to be leaving Southeast Asia, represented by a Hmong man holding a Laotian flag, and careening toward the continental United States, where another Hmong man bearing an American flag offered the greeting, “welcome to the U.S.” Had this depiction of Hmong refugee migration included only those components, the illustration could have been on the front page of any pamphlet or orientation manual produced by a voluntary agency or government program. However, used by a Hmong Christian congregation in the Twin Cities, this image offered a decidedly religious narrative of Hmong refugee migration. Projecting from the top of the globe was a large crucifix, under which read the joyful declaration, “Thanks God for the saving of

life,” while on the trans-Pacific airplane, the artist had emblazoned a reference to John 14:6: “I am the way.”¹

This illustration of the “Hmong refugee and immigrant to the United States of America” cleverly told three separate, but related, stories. On one level, it offered a providential narrative of migration. In telling of their coming to America, devoutly Christian Hmong refugees described their journey as the product of direct divine intervention. It was God, they said, who had delivered the Hmong people to the United States, where they could enjoy a future of freedom and security.

Moreover, the image illustrated how, in Hmong collective memory, Hmong passage to the United States stood as a moment of spiritual transformation and religious migration. Resettlement in the United States produced a wide array of changes in Hmong religious life, including the decision by many Hmong people to adopt Christianity. Not only did many Hmong Christians believe that they had come to the United States because of God, but that Hmong people came to God because they had come to the United States. For these Hmong refugees, the two journeys were intertwined: discovering a new spiritual home in Christianity was part of making a new home in the United States. As they found a new way of life in American communities, they also embraced a new way of navigating their complex spiritual landscapes through Christianity, a religion that Hmong people have translated as *kev cai tshiab*—literally, “the new rule or way.”

The image told one final story, more obscure but no less important: that Christian churches did indeed provide the way to the United States for thousands of Hmong and other Southeast Asian refugees after the Vietnam War. Government resettlement efforts relied heavily

¹ Folder 62, Box 2, The Refugee Studies Center, University of Minnesota Records, General/Multiethnic Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

on religious voluntary agencies, which, in conjunction with congregations and church-affiliated charities across the country, provided abundant money, manpower, and material resources to national and local resettlement efforts. The church-state administrative arrangements of refugee assistance, while not typically the most fruitful material for Hollywood humor, found its way into the film *Gran Torino*. In one scene, Clint Eastwood, playing the cantankerous character Walt Kowalski, interrogated a Hmong teenager, Sue, as he drove her home.

“I don’t know how you ended up in the Midwest, with snow on the ground six months out of the year,” he grumbled. “What is it, you jungle people wanted to be the—”

“*Hill* people!” Sue corrected him impatiently. “We’re hill people—not jungle people.” She impishly ridiculed his ignorance with a taunt—“Bugabugabuga!”—and a mock menacing gesture. Then, taking a more serious tone, she decided that his question deserved an answer after all. “Blame the Lutherans,” she said. “They brought us over here.”²

From the “I am the way” trans-Pacific jetliner to the declaration by Sue to “blame the Lutherans,” Christian churches were central to the refugee migration and resettlement of Hmong people in the United States. In this dissertation, I investigate the religious dimensions of Hmong refugee resettlement, which Americans undertook simultaneously as a government project of Cold War humanitarianism and as a church-led missionary enterprise guided by ideals of hospitality, freedom, and global Christian compassion. Looking closely at the experiences of both Hmong refugees and Christian resettlement workers in Saint Paul and Minneapolis in the 1970s and 1980s, I examine how government resettlement policies and church resettlement practices together transformed Hmong religious life. More broadly, I explore the complexity of

² Clint Eastwood, *Gran Torino*, 2009.

delegating public work to private religious institutions at a moment when religious pluralism was changing America.

On one level, this dissertation is a study of church-state governance in an era of unprecedented religious diversity, an inquiry into the possibilities and perils that arise when the sacred and the state overlap, and a cautionary tale about the ease of putting religious pluralism into practice. Internationally, nationally, and locally, American refugee resettlement has involved close cooperation between government and religious institutions, to which governments have delegated the tasks of providing initial resettlement services and long-term adjustment programs. However, recent demographic changes complicated these public-private arrangements, particularly in the last three decades of the twentieth century: the American population during that period became more religiously diverse, and Christian resettlement organizations, previously responsible for serving mainly fellow Christians, faced the new task of serving a Muslim, Buddhist, and animist clientele. At the same time, religious pluralism, as an emerging ideology promoting interreligious understanding and accord in an increasingly multireligious population, gained greater currency.

Using Hmong resettlement as a case study, I explore how Christian agencies adapted to the new religious diversity and negotiated their roles as church charities and extensions of the state. I consider the degree to which these arrangements allowed for accommodation of religious difference and protection of religious freedoms, especially of minorities. I argue that religious voluntary agencies and sponsoring congregations were keenly aware of the complications of operating in a religiously diverse setting and generally aspired to understand and support the religious traditions of the refugees they resettled, out of a commitment to multiculturalism, religious freedom, and religious pluralism. They pursued the mission of resettlement work

through compassionate efforts to “welcome the stranger,” rather than through overt appeals for converts, and endeavored to distance themselves from the cultural imperialism of previous generations of Christian missionaries. In resettling Hmong refugees, realizing the ideals of religious pluralism nonetheless proved difficult.

In addition, this dissertation explores the multiple ways in which refugee resettlement policies and refugee migration bore impact on the religious choices of Hmong refugees. I approach refugee resettlement as a moment of religious crossing, dislocation, and transformation as much as it was a process of geographic, economic, social, and cultural upheaval. In so doing, I explore the multiple ways in which government resettlement policies produced pressures for religious conformity for Hmong refugees: first, by imposing unexpected constraints on the practice of indigenous Hmong religion, and, second, by relying on a public-private, church-state system of resettlement that established close, influential relationships between Hmong refugees and Christian churches that were often refugees’ first point of contact for assistance.

I argue that, despite earnest efforts to make refugee assistance a secular and religiously neutral enterprise, resettlement policies deprived Hmong people of the human and material resources necessary to continue indigenous Hmong religion at the same time that they made it easy for Hmong people to pursue Christianity as an alternative means of maintaining harmonious relations with the spirit world. Even more fundamentally problematic was the ambiguous definition of “religion” itself. Uncertainty about what constituted religious activity in church resettlement efforts meant that Christian religion was hard to delimit and manage. Even more, uncertainty about whether Hmong beliefs and practices constituted a true religion made Hmong traditions hard to accommodate and protect. Hmong Americans ultimately used the ambiguous status of their indigenous religion to their advantage, cleverly redefining and refashioning their

indigenous traditions in order to retain them. In the end, however Hmong people chose to handle their encounter with Christianity, refugee migration to the United States set in motion significant transformations in the religious lives of Hmong Americans.

Refugee Resettlement Policy in an Age of Religious Pluralism

Since the Second World War, refugee resettlement in the United States has been an elaborate joint endeavor between federal, state, and local governments and a panoply of private voluntary agencies.³ These administrative arrangements worked satisfactorily throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century, enough that, by the fall of Saigon in 1975, both government and voluntary agencies considered a coordinated response to be the best approach to resettling the flood of refugees fleeing Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. As had been done with previous refugee communities, the United States government expanded its capacity by delegating public work to private institutions. As an effort dependent on governments, charities, and churches, refugee resettlement thus exemplifies a strategy that William Novak has described as

³ Stephen Porter, “Defining Public Responsibility in a Global Age: Refugees, NGOs, and the American State” (Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Chicago, 2009); Carl Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate: The United States and Refugees During the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Stephanie Nawyn, “Making a Place to Call Home: Refugee Resettlement Organizations, Religion, and the State” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Southern California, 2006); Stephanie Nawyn, “Faithfully Providing Refuge: The Role of Religious Organizations in Refugee Assistance and Advocacy,” *The Center for Comparative Immigration Studies* (2005); David North, Lawrence Lewin, and Jennifer Wagner, *Kaleidoscope: The Resettlement of Refugees in the United States by the Voluntary Agencies* (Washington, D.C.: New TransCentury Foundation, 1982).

“public-private governance” and that Martha Minow and Jody Freeman have called “government by contract.”⁴

Refugee resettlement is not only an instance of public-private collaboration, but also church-state collaboration. The most prominent voluntary agencies involved with Southeast Asian refugee resettlement were religious agencies. Even today, most of the voluntary agencies that hold official contracts with the federal government to offer refugee resettlement services are religious organizations. The close ties between government and religious institutions characterize refugee resettlement not only nationally, but also locally. At the ground level, local government and voluntary agencies have borrowed capacity by entrusting local church-affiliated charities and local congregations with significant responsibilities, especially serving as refugees’ sponsors for the first weeks upon arrival. Particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, when Southeast Asian refugees arrived in great numbers, congregational sponsorship was the resettlement model of choice.⁵

⁴ Jody Freeman and Martha Minow, eds., *Government by Contract: Outsourcing and American Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); William Novak, “Public-Private Governance: A Historical Introduction,” in *Government By Contract: Outsourcing and American Democracy*, ed. Martha Minow and Jody Freeman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 23–40; Elisabeth Clemens, “Lineages of the Rube Goldberg State: Building and Blurring Public Programs, 1900-1940,” in *Rethinking Political Institutions: The Art of the State*, ed. Ian Shapiro, Stephen Skowronek, and Daniel Galvin (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 380–443; Walter Powell and Elisabeth Clemens, eds., *Private Action and the Public Good* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

⁵ Nicole Ives, Jill Witmer Sinha, and Ram Cnaan, “Who Is Welcoming the Stranger? Exploring Faith-Based Service Provision to Refugees in Philadelphia,” *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 29, no. 1 (2010): 71–89; Mary Pipher, *The Middle of Everywhere: The World’s Refugees Come to Our Town* (New York: Harcourt, 2002); Helen Fein, *Congregational Sponsors of Indochinese Refugees in the United States, 1979-1981: Helping Beyond Borders* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1987). The longstanding government reliance on religious institutions to resettle refugees offers a useful historical corrective to contemporary public policy debates that frame the use of “faith-based” organizations, especially congregations, for social service provision as a new practice. For a discussion about the contemporary debate about these policies, see E. J Dionne and Ming Hsu

Historically, the religious voluntary agencies that undertook the work of refugee resettlement were responsible for resettling their own people—fellow Lutherans or Catholics, for example—and if they did not resettle their co-religionists, they at least served members of religious communities that were familiar. However, these circumstances changed in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, when the largest, most experienced, and most enthusiastic voluntary agencies were Christian agencies that faced the unprecedented task of resettling thousands of Buddhists, animists, and ancestor worshippers. (“I think if there were any Lutherans—it must have been just by accident,” said Ingrid Walter of the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service.)⁶ That the refugee population from the 1970s onward shifted toward non-white, non-European, and non-Christian groups was only part of a broader demographic transformation in the United States. Especially after the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965, which ended the discriminatory national origins quota system and opened the doors wider to immigration from Asia, the American population overall was becoming more ethno-racially and religiously diverse.

If the clientele of the resettlement agencies was changing, so, too, was the legal, political, cultural, and theological terrain on which they were operating. At the same time that the United States was becoming more multireligious, the link between church and state received new

Chen, eds., *Sacred Places, Civic Purposes: Should Government Help Faith-Based Charity?* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2001); Robert Wuthnow, *Saving America?: Faith-Based Services and the Future of Civil Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Ram A Cnaan, *The Newer Deal: Social Work and Religion in Partnership* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Ram A Cnaan, *The Invisible Caring Hand: American Congregations and the Provision of Welfare* (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

⁶ Ingrid Walter, interview by Cordelia Cox, December 28, 1982, Oral History Collection, Archives of Cooperative Lutheranism, Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., Evangelical Lutheran Church of America Archive, transcript, 43.

scrutiny by the courts. The second half of the twentieth century saw a series of consequential Supreme Court decisions that facilitated a shift toward greater separation of church and state.⁷ Meanwhile, legal definitions of religion expanded to accommodate non-Western traditions.⁸

Christian churches were also changing. Voluntary agencies, like other public and private institutions, adopted a stance of religious neutrality, made formal declarations of their promise to respect cultural and religious differences, and served with an explicit aim of advancing freedom, including religious freedom.⁹ The efforts to align their refugee services with these commitments reflected American Christians' engagement in religious pluralism and their aspirations of cultivating harmonious relations and mutual understanding across religious boundaries.¹⁰ The adoption of pluralist ideas reoriented not only Christian charity and humanitarian work, but also missions. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, liberal Christians distanced themselves from the culturally imperialistic endeavors of previous generations and redefined missions as cultivating relationships and pursuing "Christian presence," rather than simply

⁷ Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, "The State," in *Themes in Religion and American Culture*, ed. Philip Goff and Paul Harvey (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 225–259.

⁸ Courtney Bender and Jennifer Snow, "From Alleged Buddhists to Unreasonable Hindus: First Amendment Jurisprudence after 1965," in *A Nation of Religions*, ed. Stephen Prothero (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 181–208.

⁹ For a discussion of the importance of the value of freedom in Christian missionary work during this period, see Sarah Ruble, *The Gospel of Freedom and Power: Protestant Missionaries in American Culture After World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

¹⁰ Courtney Bender and Pamela Klassen, eds., *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Martin Marty, "Pluralisms," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 612, no. 1 (July 1, 2007): 13–25; William Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America the Contentious History of a Founding Ideal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

winning converts and saving souls. By the 1970s and 1980s, even conservative evangelicals were exploring the possibility of a missions approach involving “dialogue” with non-Christians.¹¹ As an enterprise that united humanitarian and missionary impulses and that called for building bonds with people who were religiously and culturally different, refugee resettlement was a rich site for Christian experimentation with the enactment of pluralist ideals.

Christian voluntary agencies’ goal of getting along with religiously different neighbors converged with a American exceptionalist pride as well. To be the land of the free and thus the land of the many faithful was an achievement of the uniquely American “lively experiment” of disestablishment.¹² In the second half of the twentieth century, Americans articulated a commitment to harmonious relations across lines of religious difference, glorifying the United States as a “tri-faith” nation of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews in the years after the Second World War and, in later decades, praising the modern American nation as a multicultural mosaic of faiths.¹³ The Cold War was an important context for this framing of American religious

¹¹ Grant Wacker, “Second Thoughts on the Great Commission: Liberal Protestants and Foreign Missions, 1890-1940,” in *Earthen Vessels: American Evangelicals and Foreign Missions, 1880-1980*, ed. Joel Carpenter and Wilbur Shenk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990); William Hutchison, *Errand to the World: American Protestant Thought and Foreign Missions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 181, 196.

¹² Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005 Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Roger Finke, “The Illusion of Shifting Demand: Supply-Side Interpretations of American Religious History,” in *Narrating U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas Tweed (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 108–124; R. Stephen Warner, *A Church of Our Own: Disestablishment and Diversity in American Religion* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Sidney Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

¹³ Kevin Schultz, *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to Its Protestant Promise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Eck, *A New Religious America*.

diversity: affirming a commitment to religious freedom to refugees fleeing Communist regimes offered Americans the opportunity to differentiate the United States from the tyrannical, God-less countries from which so many Cold War refugees were exiled.

By the time Hmong refugees boarded the first airplanes to deliver them to the Twin Cities, these political, social, cultural, and religious developments intersected to create the circumstances for a series of complex encounters between Hmong refugees and Christian church sponsors. For the Christian resettlement workers, refugee care offered an opportunity to live their Christian faith through acts of hospitality and to pursue a new vision of multicultural and pluralistic missions. However, the difficulty of realizing these pluralistic ideals and the challenge of negotiating the church-state tensions inherent in American resettlement policies soon became clear, particularly at the local level. Part of the problem was that voluntary agencies delegated responsibilities to congregations, which were unequivocally religious institutions. Recruited to be “sponsors,” these congregations supplied manpower and material resources, allowed voluntary agencies to increase the scope and breadth of their services, and had the closest contact and greatest direct impact on the lives of newly arrived refugees. At the same time, congregations compromised the agencies’ mandate to serve with religious neutrality. Voluntary agencies made serious efforts to manage and instruct congregations in what they considered appropriate expressions of religion in resettlement service. Congregation-based resettlement volunteers, however, had a great deal of freedom and, in some cases, little oversight. More significantly, they did not see refugee sponsorship as work delegated by government to churches, but understood refugee care, first and foremost, as a church-led enterprise and as a ministry of Christian charity, in which distinction between religious and non-religious work was neither easy

nor necessary. In the end, even if sponsors endeavored to accommodate religious differences and fashion a pluralistic resettlement ministry, they struggled to realize these goals, especially when working with a group as foreign to them as the Hmong, whom many did not believe had a religion in the first place.

Through this study of Hmong refugee resettlement, I offer several contributions to scholarly understanding of public-private, church-state governance and American religious pluralism. First, by exposing how resettlement policies shaped the religious trajectories of Hmong individuals and communities, I show that the state intervenes in religious life, often in subtle and unanticipated ways, and most potently in the lives of people, like the Hmong, whose religious traditions are far on the margins.¹⁴ Through a variety of legal, political, and administrative instruments, governments can have a direct impact on the religious beliefs and practices of everyday people. The state can subsidize religious enterprises, structure how religious institutions operate, regulate religious practices, suppress some religious options, and promote other religious choices—all forces at work in this case of Hmong refugee resettlement. This study thus emphasizes the need to bring the state back into the study of religion and to explore how, contrary to the popular mythology of American religious free enterprise, religious life in America is not autonomous, free, and competitive. Even in a nation with a founding

¹⁴ Some scholars have explored the impact of government policies on religious life. Robert Wuthnow, most notably, has written that “despite an official, constitutionally guaranteed stance of neutrality toward religious organizations, government policies have scarcely ever been considered in terms of their possible impact on the religious environment” and that, since World War II, the evolution of federal government policies and programs have contributed to a restructuring of American religious life. Similarly, this study of Hmong refugee resettlement is an investigation of resettlement’s “environmental impact on American religion.” See Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II*, Studies on Church and State (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 8–9.

commitment to disestablishment, the state structures the putatively free religious marketplace, in a way that is less than neutral.

In addition, the story of Hmong religious change demonstrates that religious pluralism has posed important challenges to established strategies of governance. Applying a familiar formula for resettlement to new circumstances offered many practical advantages, but not without a cost. As Hmong experiences illustrate, there were religious repercussions to expanding public capacity through contracts with church charities, and religious minorities felt these consequences most acutely. In time, resettlement agencies and their partnering congregations adjusted their practices in order to more fully abide by their own commitment to honor the religious diversity of their clientele. Stephanie Nawyn, for instance, has demonstrated that contemporary religious refugee resettlement organizations operate no differently from non-religious agencies and do not openly proselytize, although it remains possible that they have in the past.¹⁵ This study, then, offers a glimpse at how these organizations learned from their experiences and developed a greater capacity for religious accommodation in response to the religious diversity of the people whom they served. Put another way, the story of Hmong refugee resettlement illustrates one way in which, as Stephen Prothero has suggested, “religious diversity is changing the values, rites, and institutions of the nation.”¹⁶

Finally, the experiences of Hmong refugees and the religious pressures they experienced during resettlement show that religious pluralism, as a prescriptive ideology, was difficult to translate into action. Publicly extolling the United States as a nation founded on religious

¹⁵ Nawyn, “Making a Place to Call Home,” 134.

¹⁶ Stephen Prothero, ed., *A Nation of Religions: The Politics of Pluralism in Multireligious America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

tolerance and freedom, resettlement officials and lay volunteers both made genuine efforts to accommodate the beliefs and practices of the refugees whom they assisted. Even more, they considered affirming the religious and cultural background of refugee families to be more than a legal imperative and social expectation—it was a sacred obligation, informed by new developments in Christian thought. However, when face to face with Hmong refugees who practiced ancestor worship and shamanism, Christian resettlement workers sometimes found themselves engaged in surprising—and at times uncomfortable—interreligious encounters for which they were unprepared. Practicing religious pluralism in their refugee service was, like much of the work of resettlement, characterized by uncertainty, experimentation, and error. At the same time, many Christians believed that working in resettlement ministries and developing relationships with refugees was a “gift” and an invaluable opportunity for discovery and growth.

Hmong refugee resettlement is, in certain ways, a unique story. Hmong Americans constitute a relatively small ethnic group in the United States. In 2010, about 260,000 people of Hmong origin lived in the United States, a fraction of the 1.7 million Vietnamese Americans, 3 million Filipino Americans, and 4 million Chinese Americans.¹⁷ Compared to other immigrants and refugees who arrived during the same period, they faced a particularly difficult adjustment to American life. Generally agrarian in background, they had few transferrable job skills, and most had limited education and knowledge of English language. Whether they were resettled in small isolated towns or large urban centers, those who arrived in the first years of resettlement had no previously established ethnic community to welcome and assist them and ease the transition to American life. The difficulties of adjustment were not limited to economic, social, and political

¹⁷ Pew Research Center, “The Rise of Asian Americans,” *Pew Social & Demographic Trends*, accessed November 22, 2013, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/asianamericans-graphics/smaller-groups/>.

matters, but also the religious. Hmong ritual practices and spiritual beliefs, particularly those related to health, were difficult for many Americans to comprehend and to categorize, and the fact that Hmong traditions did not easily conform to basic expectations of what constitutes “religion” further complicated the encounter between the Hmong refugees and their Christian sponsors.

At the same time, Hmong resettlement is a useful case, in part because they were representative of broader developments. For one, the religious voluntary agencies that resettled the Hmong remain prominent humanitarian organizations. Hmong resettlement occurred at a pivotal moment, as the refugee populations were changing and as Christian agencies were adjusting to emerging norms of pluralism and new legal and political developments reordering the relationship between church and state. Hmong resettlement tested the capability of Christian organizations to operate pluralistically and informed how they handled subsequent Asian and African refugees who predominated in the refugee populations that arrived in the 1980s and 1990s.

At the same time, it is precisely because of Hmong people’s uniqueness that their experience offers an illuminating opportunity to explore the religious dimensions of resettlement and to discern the complications of public-private, church-state collaborations in an increasingly multireligious society. Suffering acute social and economic dislocation, Hmong refugees relied heavily on voluntary agencies and churches, while still pursuing animist traditions incomprehensibly foreign to Christian sponsors. As a case of extreme difference and dependency, Hmong resettlement renders in sharp relief the consequences of using religious organizations for social service provision. This study raises critical questions about the capacity of American individuals and institutions to accommodate religious difference and the possibility

that, despite sincere efforts to offer services in a religiously neutral fashion, these administrative arrangements might still exert pressures for religious conformity, on both the people who give care as well as those who receive it.

In the end, a close study of the impact of refugee resettlement policy on Hmong religious life intervenes in a larger story about religion in America. It exposes the complex convergence of two tensions characterizing American religion and governance: first, that the United States is both remarkably multireligious and deeply Christian; and, second, that church and state are intertwined despite a founding commitment to disestablishment and separation. Hmong resettlement experiences offer valuable lessons about how new religious diversity has challenged old ways of governing and how Americans have attempted to govern new religious diversity.

A Spiritual History of Hmong Refugee Migration and the Question of Religion

In the stories of many Hmong Americans, such as the members of the Hmong Christian Church of God in Minneapolis, the experience of trans-Pacific crossing was interwoven with religious and spiritual crossing. Thomas Tweed has argued that religion is fundamentally defined by the experience of “crossing and dwelling”; migration and movement are central events in the spiritual lives of many.¹⁸ Moreover, as Robert Orsi has argued, migration itself is “a spiritual event,” one in which “the outward journeying was matched by a changing inner terrain.”¹⁹ In this dissertation, I explore the history of Hmong refugee migration as a moment of spiritual and

¹⁸ Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

¹⁹ Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 150.

religious transformation and investigate how Hmong people experienced resettlement in the United States in religious terms. I argue that Hmong refugee resettlement—both Hmong people’s experience of refugee migration and the government policies that directed it—was not only an experience of political, economic, and cultural transformation, but also of religious upheaval and innovation. Refugee resettlement set in motion several transformations in Hmong religious life. First, refugee resettlement facilitated Hmong adoption of Christianity, which Hmong people incorporated into their religious lives for their own purposes and in their own ways. Second, refugee resettlement imposed pressures on the practice of indigenous Hmong religion. In turn, Hmong people adapted and reinvented their indigenous beliefs and practices, as well as its institutions and identifications, in order to ensure that their religious traditions survive and thrive in a new American setting.

Since their arrival in the United States in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, Hmong refugees have fascinated both scholars and the public at large. The dramatic story of a proud warrior people turned tragically maladjusted migrants, uprooted from the jungle and unceremoniously transplanted in towns across America, has generated popular films such as *Gran Torino* as well as a rich scholarly literature focused on Hmong assimilation, cultural preservation, and community formation. Produced primarily by sociologists, anthropologists, ethnic studies scholars, along with professional social workers, physicians, and educators who serve a Hmong clientele, these studies have emphasized the “collision of cultures” experienced by Hmong refugees, particularly in the first years after their arrival in the United States.²⁰ Can Hmong people become American, and if so, how?: these questions animated much of the

²⁰ See, for example, Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).

research about Hmong refugees in the early years of resettlement.²¹ At the same time, cultural preservationists offered an alternative and similarly lamentable mirror narrative of Hmong people, who suffered profound cultural loss in an American setting that eroded an essential ethnic identity, culture, and community.²²

Today, the predominant narrative is not of Hmong refugees struggling to cope with life in modern America, but of Hmong Americans who have pursued new possibilities for what it means to be, and live as, Hmong people in diaspora.²³ In keeping with the most recent scholarship exploring Hmong migration to the United States, I eschew the easy binaries of the older culture clash narrative. Hmong or American, preservation or assimilation: to these options, I answer both and neither. In studying the on-the-ground negotiations of encounter, exchange, and innovation, I explore how Hmong people in the United States have not simply stayed Hmong or become American, but have created something new altogether. Throughout the past four decades, they have used the material and spiritual resources at their disposal in their transition from Hmong refugees to American citizens and in their broader reinvention of themselves as Hmong Americans.

²¹ See, for example, Glenn Hendricks, Bruce Downing, and Amos Deinard, eds., *The Hmong in Transition* (New York: Center for Migration Studies and the Southeast Asian Refugee Studies Project of the University of Minnesota, 1986); Bruce Downing and Douglas Olney, eds., *The Hmong in the West: Observations and Reports: Papers of the 1981 Hmong Research Conference, University of Minnesota, CURA 82-1* (Minneapolis: Southeast Asian Refugee Studies Project, Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, University of Minnesota, 1982).

²² See, for example, Christine Desan, “A Change of Faith for Hmong Refugees,” *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 7 (1983): 45–48.

²³ See, for example, Vincent Her and Mary Louise Buley-Meissner, eds., *Hmong and American: From Refugees to Citizens* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2012); Chia Youyee Vang, *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

The creativity of Hmong Americans in forging something new is particularly apparent in Hmong religious life. Practical concerns about Hmong people's political and socioeconomic adjustment have meant that issues such as educational attainment and English language acquisition have received more scholarly attention than Hmong religious life. To be sure, many people have studied specific aspects of indigenous Hmong religion, such as lifecycle ceremonies and holiday rituals.²⁴ Hmong shamanism has attracted a particularly rich body of research, given the interest and practical need for culturally sensitive medical care.²⁵ Several scholars have

²⁴ See, for example, Catherine Falk, "Hmong Instructions to the Dead: What the Mouth Organ Qeej Says," *Asian Folklore Studies* 63 (2004); Joseph Davy, "Por Thao's Funeral," *Hmong Studies Journal* 2, no. 1 (1997); Catherine Falk, "Upon Meeting the Ancestors: The Hmong Funeral Ritual in Asia and Australia," *Hmong Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (1996): 1–15; Bruce Bliatout, "Hmong Death Customs: Traditional and Acculturated," in *Ethnic Variations in Dying, Death, and Grief: Diversity in Universality*, ed. Donald Irish, Kathleen Lundquist, and Vivian Nelsen (Washington, D.C.: Taylor and Francis, 1993), 79–100; George Scott, "A New Year in a New Land: Religious Change Among the Lao Hmong Refugees in San Diego," in *The Hmong in the West: Observations and Reports*, ed. Bruce Downing and Douglas Olney (Minneapolis: Southeast Asian Refugee Studies Project, Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, University of Minnesota, 1982), 63–85.

²⁵ See, for example, Deborah Helsel, Marilyn Mochel, and Robert Bauer, "Chronic Illness and Hmong Shamans," *Journal of Transcultural Nursing* 16, no. 2 (April 2005): 150–154; Neng Moua, "Satisfaction Levels Among Hmong Clients Using the Services of Shamans in Fresno County, California" (California State University-Fresno, 2004); Gregory Plotnikoff et al., "Hmong Shamanism: Animist Spiritual Healing in Minnesota," *Minnesota Medicine* 85, no. 6 (2002): 29–34; G. Xiong, "Knowledge, Utilization, and Perceptions of Shamanism and Western Counseling or Psychotherapy by the Various Hmong Subgenerational Groups and Religious Beliefs" (Master's Thesis, California State University-Fresno, 2001); Paja Thao and Dwight Conquergood, *I Am a Shaman: A Hmong Life Story with Ethnographic Commentary*, trans. Xa Thao, Southeast Asian Refugee Studies Occasional Papers 8 (Minneapolis: Southeast Asian Refugee Studies Project, Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, University of Minnesota, 1989); Jacque Lemoine, "Shamanism in the Context of Hmong Resettlement," in *The Hmong in Transition*, ed. Glenn Hendricks, Bruce Downing, and Amos Deinard (New York: Center for Migration Studies and the Southeast Asian Refugee Studies Project of the University of Minnesota, 1986), 337–348; Taggart Siegel and Dwight Conquergood, *Between Two Worlds: The Hmong Shaman in America* (Siegal Productions, 1982).

offered rich, detailed studies of Hmong religious life in Asia.²⁶ However, scholars of Hmong American life have not offered a full historical study of Hmong spiritual traditions as a distinctive religion in the United States.

This silence about Hmong religion is not accidental. Scholars of Hmong Studies disagree on whether or not indigenous Hmong beliefs and rituals constitute a religion. More importantly, Hmong people themselves, especially conservative Protestant Hmong, have been ambivalent about applying the term religion to describe Hmong traditions.²⁷ Identifying Hmong shamanism as a religion has given rise to particular controversy.²⁸ Describing Hmong beliefs and practices in

²⁶ See, for example, Nicholas Tapp, “Ritual Relations and Identity: Hmong and Others,” in *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States*, ed. Andrew Turton (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000); Nicholas Tapp, “The Impact of Missionary Christianity upon Marginalized Ethnic Minorities: The Case of the Hmong,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 20, no. 1 (March 1989): 70–95; Nicholas Tapp, “Hmong Religion,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 48, no. 1 (1989): 59–94; Nicholas Tapp, “The Reformation of Culture: Hmong Refugees from Laos,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 1 (1988): 20; Jean Mottin, “A Hmong Shaman’s Seance,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 43 (1984); Nusit Chindarsi, “Hmong Shamanism,” in *Highlanders of Thailand*, ed. John McKinnon and Wanat Bhruksasri (Kuala Lumpur, Oxford, New York, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1983); Jean Mottin, *Allons Faire Le Tour Du Ciel Et De La Terre: Le Chamanisme Des Hmong Vu Dans Les Textes* (Bangkok: White Lotus Co, 1982); Nusit Chindarsi, *The Religion of the Hmong Njua* (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1976).

²⁷ Several scholars have pointed out that, historically, Hmong people have not understood their beliefs and practices as a distinct, consciously articulated religion. See, for example, Vincent Her, “Hmong Cosmology: Proposed Model, Preliminary Insights,” *Hmong Studies Journal* 6 (2005): 1–25; Daphne Winland, “Christianity and Community: Conversion and Adaptation among Hmong Refugee Women,” *The Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie* 19, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 23–24; Timothy Dunnigan, “Processes of Identity Maintenance in Hmong Society,” in *The Hmong in Transition*, ed. Glenn Hendricks, Bruce Downing, and Amos Deinard (New York: Center for Migration Studies and the Southeast Asian Refugee Studies Project of the University of Minnesota, 1986), 41–53; Scott, “A New Year in a New Land: Religious Change Among the Lao Hmong Refugees in San Diego.” At the same time, conservative Protestant Christian Hmong people have understood indigenous Hmong religion as a false, demon-worshiping religion. See, for example, Naolue Taylor Kue, *A Hmong Church History* (Thornton: Hmong District, 2000).

²⁸ Lemoine, “Shamanism in the Context of Hmong Resettlement,” 346.

terms of “thought,” “cosmology,” “culture,” and *kevcai*, or “custom” has offered one workaround.²⁹

The issue, however, is much bigger than whether or not “religion” is the right term to apply to Hmong traditions; it is a matter of what religion is in the first place. As Nicholas Tapp has admitted, the withholding of this label is due in part to the difficulty of using a foreign, Western concept to make sense of non-Western beliefs and rituals. Hmong shamanism, he has explained, is not a religion when one evaluates it according to Western standards—but he leaves open the possibility that it could be a religion when considered through a different lens.³⁰ He is not alone in recognizing the cultural and historical specificity of the concept of religion. As Winnifred Sullivan has argued, after the Reformation, true religion was understood as “private, voluntary, individual, textual, and believed,” while “[p]ublic, coercive, communal, oral, and enacted religion, on the other hand, was seen to be ‘false.’” But, she has pointed out, this “false” religion “was, and perhaps still is, the religion of most of the world.”³¹ As a set of beliefs and rituals centered on communality, practice, and oral tradition, indigenous Hmong religion falls precisely into the realm of what many people considered to be “false” religion.

The question of whether or not Hmong people have a religion, while not the focus of this study, is an unavoidable matter, as the uncertainty that surrounds how to categorize indigenous Hmong beliefs and practices has shaped so many interactions that Hmong people

²⁹ Tapp, “Hmong Religion”; Her, “Hmong Cosmology: Proposed Model, Preliminary Insights”; Gary Yia Lee and Nicholas Tapp, *Culture and Customs of the Hmong* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2010).

³⁰ Tapp, “Hmong Religion”; Bender and Snow, “From Alleged Buddhists to Unreasonable Hindus: First Amendment Jurisprudence after 1965”; Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

³¹ Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom.*, 8.

have had with American institutions—not only Christian churches and voluntary agencies, but also government agencies and hospitals, which promised protections and privileges for people who had a legitimate religion. In this regard, an exploration of Hmong religious change under refugee resettlement policies is, in fact, an exploration of the limits of religious freedom and pluralism in the United States. How does the state accommodate the religion of a group of people if it is not certain that these people have a religion in the first place? How does religious pluralism work if some people do not, and cannot, claim a religion? What happens when people claim a religion that does not adhere to the common definition of constitutes a religion? And in a nation that takes great pride in its exceptionalist self-imagination as being a pluralistic land of the religiously free, how narrowly or broadly should religion be defined?

These may not have been the most pressing questions for Hmong refugees to ponder when they first arrived in the United States, but they were not hypothetical questions.³² When Hmong refugees applied to resettle in the United States, resettlement officials conducting the screening interviews asked all refugee applicants to identify their religion. Almost universally, Hmong refugees claimed a religion, even if the label they chose at the moment of the interview was not an entirely accurate description of their beliefs and practices. The expectation that they claim a religion even before they had set foot on American soil foreshadowed what awaited them in the United States: negotiating their native spiritual beliefs and practices with an American government, society, and culture that praises religious belonging, protects those who claim a

³² Vincent Her argues that “[i]t is true Hmong Americans (as well as those outside of the U. S.) do not have an official name for their religion, yet it is not entirely clear if that concern is a pressing one in the eyes of many people.” See Her, “Hmong Cosmology: Proposed Model, Preliminary Insights.”

respectable religion, and presumes that religion is something that all people naturally have.³³ Hmong people could not easily avail of these advantages, however, because, as Sullivan has pointed out, “in order to enforce laws guaranteeing religious freedom you must first have religion.”³⁴ Even if Hmong people were able to claim “animism” or “ancestor worship” during their resettlement interviews, theirs was not an institutionalized, individualized, textual, believed religion, the variety that still today continues to enjoy greater recognition and accommodation in the United States.

In this spiritual history of Hmong refugee migration, I trace the historical development of indigenous Hmong religion in the United States and explore how Hmong people have innovated and reconstructed their indigenous beliefs and practices, while identifying these traditions as both “religion” and “culture” as they adapted them to the American religious landscape. Rejecting the interpretation of indigenous Hmong religion as a vague, primitive tradition and a problem that Americans must tolerate, manage, and neutralize, I study indigenous Hmong religion as a set of beliefs and practices that must be understood in its own right and, as much as possible, on its own terms.³⁵ I investigate the challenges that Christian resettlement volunteers faced in offering Christian care and pluralistic service to a group of people who did not clearly have a religion, the problems that Hmong refugees confronted because they could not easily claim to have a religion, the challenges that resettlement policy imposed on Hmong people’s

³³ Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, “Religion Naturalized: The New Establishment,” in *After Pluralism*, ed. Courtney Bender and Pamela Klassen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

³⁴ Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*, 1.

³⁵ For a critique of the interpretation of indigenous Hmong religion as “primitive,” see Nao Xiong and Yang Sao Xiong, “A Critique of Timothy Vang’s Hmong Religious Conversion and Resistance Study,” *Hmong Studies Journal* 9 (2008).

foreign—and thus invisible—religion, and, finally, the clever strategies by which Hmong people acquired and deployed the categories of religion and culture through which their traditions could be understood and accommodated. In this sense, I point to a fourth possible interpretation of the “I Am the Way” airplane: refugee resettlement was one avenue through which some Hmong refugees found Christianity. Even more, it was an avenue through which Hmong people found religion as a way to organize, describe, and protect their indigenous beliefs and practices and to secure a seat at the multicultural table.

In understanding Hmong religious change, I investigate not only changes in indigenous Hmong religion, but also Hmong adoption of Christianity. Several scholars have investigated the phenomenon of Hmong conversion to Christianity, in the United States and in other settings, including in a resettlement context.³⁶ Determining the extent to which any single event shapes individual religious change is difficult, if not impossible, as religious conversions are the product of multiple converging forces.³⁷ For that reason, I approach this study not as an investigation into the degree to which resettlement alone caused Hmong adoption of Christianity. By no means was resettlement the sole cause of the growth of Hmong Christianity, even if it did contribute to it.

³⁶ See, for example, Vang, *Hmong America*; Daphne Winland, “Revisiting a Case Study of Hmong Refugees and Ontario Mennonites,” *Journal of Mennonite History* 24 (2006): 169–176; Alison Lewis, “The Western Protestant Missionaries and the Miao in Yunnan and Guizhou, Southwest China,” in *Turbulent Times and Enduring Peoples: Mountain Minorities in the Southeast Asian Massif*, ed. Jean Michaud (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000), 79–98; Siu-Woo Cheung, “Millenarianism, Christian Movements, and Ethnic Change Among the Miao in Southwest China,” in *Cultural Encounters on China’s Ethnic Frontiers*, ed. Stevan Harrell (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 217–247; Winland, “Christianity and Community”; Daphne Winland, “The Role of Religious Affiliation in Refugee Resettlement: The Case of the Hmong,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies/Etudes Ethniques Au Canada* 24, no. 1 (1992): 96–119; Tapp, “The Impact of Missionary Christianity upon Marginalized Ethnic Minorities.”

³⁷ Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

Nor is this study an examination of the degree to which Hmong people fully converted and became ‘true’ or ‘good’ Christians. Rather, this study is an exploration of how refugee resettlement set in motion a broad array of relationships and interreligious dynamics that produced a variety of religious changes, one of which was the adoption of Christian beliefs, practices, and identities.

In considering the development of Christianity in Hmong America, it is essential to note that the language of Hmong religious change is itself misleading. In an instance of what Lamin Sanneh has termed “the crucible of indigenous appropriation,” Hmong refugees became Christian in a process that involved both change and continuity.³⁸ Exploring Hmong religious life as complex and hybrid, I trouble the conception of conversion as a bimodal process in which newly acquired religious beliefs and practices supplant preexisting ones. Using Catherine Albanese’s framework of “contact and combination,” I investigate how resettlement policies established relationships between Hmong refugees and Christian church volunteers. As a result, Hmong people incorporated Christianity into their indigenous religious framework, adding practices such as participation in Christian churches and Christian prayer to the spiritual toolkit from which they could draw in times of spiritual and physical distress.³⁹ The additive character of Hmong religious life, as Gary Yia Lee and Nicholas Tapp have argued, has been identified at other sites of the Hmong diaspora and is not unique to the American setting.⁴⁰ However, the

³⁸ Lamin Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 56.

³⁹ Catherine Albanese, “Exchanging Selves, Exchanging Souls: Contact, Combination, and American Religious History,” in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas Tweed (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).

⁴⁰ Lee and Tapp, *Culture and Customs of the Hmong*.

convergence of multiple forces—the sharp dislocations produced by refugee migration, the suppression of indigenous Hmong religion, the subsidizing of Christian missionary work through American resettlement policies, and the combined pragmatism and spiritualism of Hmong refugees—makes Hmong American religious life an especially illuminating case of Hmong religious ingenuity and, more broadly, the encounters, exchanges, and innovations that characterize American religious life.

Further, a close look at the ways in which Hmong people adopted Christianity invites a more expansive understanding of religion, its purposes and practices, and its capacity for reinvention. For Hmong people—indeed, for all people—religious beliefs, practices, and identities are dynamic and evolving. Hmong Americans offer a compelling example of this reality, as they have often straddled religious boundaries, making Christianity their own without abandoning previous beliefs and practices, while also revisiting and refashioning their indigenous religion as circumstances changed and as the spirits moved them. In this project, then, I attend to the rich diversity and hybridity of Hmong religious life, paying attention to how the decision to become Christian was, for many Hmong people, an undertaking that they pursued quite differently from how Christian missionaries and sponsors might have envisioned. There has never been a single, tidy way that Hmong people have lived as Christians or animists or even, for a growing number of younger Hmong Americans, ‘none of the above.’

Through this study, I deepen scholarly understanding of Hmong American religious life, but also contribute to knowledge of understudied aspects of American religious diversity. The religious diversity introduced by Asian migrants, particularly by those who arrived after 1965, has produced a bounty of scholarship.⁴¹ However, much of the research on Asian American

religious life has focused on the more visible “world religions”—Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity—and very little research has been conducted on animism and indigenous Asian religions. In addition, much of the scholarship has focused on religious activities occurring within congregational spaces. However, indigenous Hmong religion, until very recently, has not resided in formal religious spaces, and some of the most compelling instances of religious encounter and exchange have taken place in hospitals and other seemingly non-religious settings.

For this reason, I take a “lived religion” approach, which, as Wendy Cadge and Elaine Ecklund have argued, “raises questions about religion as a conceptual category and facilitates broader analytical thinking about how the sacred is present and influential apart from formal religions and religious spaces.”⁴² In this study, I continue the work of scholars who have already begun to study how Southeast Asian refugees have experienced the sacred in everyday life.⁴³ A focus on “lived religion” offers the further advantage of understanding how Christian volunteers

⁴¹ See, for example, Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Prothero, *A Nation of Religions*; Kenneth Guest, *God in Chinatown: Religion and Survival in New York’s Evolving Immigrant Community* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Eck, *A New Religious America*; David Yoo, ed., *New Spiritual Homes: Religion and Asian Americans* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, in association with UCLA Asian American Studies Center, Los Angeles, 1999); R. Stephen Warner and Judith Wittner, eds., *Gatherings in Diaspora Religious Communities and the New Immigration* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

⁴² Wendy Cadge and Elaine Ecklund, “Immigration and Religion,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 33 (2007): 371. For an overview of lived religion scholarship, see David Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

⁴³ See, for example, Lois Ann Lorentzen et al., eds., *Religion at the Corner of Bliss and Nirvana: Politics, Identity, and Faith in New Migrant Communities* (Duke University Press Books, 2009); Aihwa Ong, *Buddha Is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

understood the ministry of refugee resettlement and how religion was present in their acts of service and care.⁴⁴

Most important, a “lived religion” approach is essential to understanding an indigenous Hmong religion that, like many other immigrant and ethnic religions, has centered on ritual practice. As Vincent Her has argued, even though Hmong people do not have a settled name for their religion, they share a common understanding of what religion means for them. “[W]hen Hmong Americans talk about ‘religion,’ they generally tend to focus on what they do (practice), the ritual and ceremonial activities they hold in their homes,” he observed. “What’s more, they accept these to be widely variable, different from region to region, community to community, and clan to clan.”⁴⁵ To study the rich array of ritual practices that Hmong people have pursued in diverse settings is thus the central mission of studying Hmong religion.

Ultimately, Hmong refugee resettlement underscores the elusiveness of religious freedom, especially for those whose beliefs and practices are at odds with established understandings of religion. Winnifred Fallers Sullivan has argued that religious freedom is impossible, and a religious history of Hmong refugee migration may indicate that she is

⁴⁴ For examples of studies of the religious dimensions of service, see Paul Lichterman and C. Brady Potts, eds., *The Civic Life of American Religion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Paul Lichterman, *Elusive Togetherness: Church Groups Trying to Bridge America’s Divisions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Courtney Bender, *Heaven’s Kitchen: Living Religion at God’s Love We Deliver* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2003); Nancy Ammerman, “Golden Rule Christianity: Lived Religion in the American Mainstream,” in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

⁴⁵ Her, “Hmong Cosmology: Proposed Model, Preliminary Insights,” 1. Similarly, Daphne Winland argued that “for most Laotian Hmong, religion is basically liturgy or ritual practice.” See Winland, “Christianity and Community,” 24.

correct.⁴⁶ But the stories told by Hmong refugees about their religious life offer slightly different lesson: if one is not free and if one's soul is not at ease, then one can move and change. That is precisely what many Hmong people did.

Sources and Methods

Refugee resettlement, like a Rube Goldberg contraption, involved many moving parts and demanded that I examine sources that reflect multiple perspectives, including that of national, state, and local government officials; national voluntary agencies and their local affiliates; church-based charities and individual congregations; ethnic mutual aid associations; and Hmong refugees and church volunteers themselves.⁴⁷ Investigating resettlement from the vantage point of these diverse participants is especially important in a project that seeks to understand the tensions that arise when institutions and individuals with different values, objectives, and experiences collaborate on an elaborately delegated project.

The research for this project also relied on oral history interviews. Oral history interviews are necessary to fully understand the experiences of Hmong refugees, for several reasons. First, oral history allows researchers to understand the history of people without archives—in this case, Hmong refugees. Relatively few paper sources have recorded the experiences of refugee resettlement from the Hmong perspective because many first-generation Hmong arrived in the United States unable to read, write, or speak English. Having been a non-literate people until the

⁴⁶ Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*.

⁴⁷ In describing refugee resettlement as a Rube Goldberg contraption, I borrow from Elizabeth Clemens's concept of the American state. See Clemens, "Lineages of the Rube Goldberg State."

middle of the twentieth century, many did not read and write Hmong either. Second, oral history allows researchers to understand events without archives—events that are often private and internal but nonetheless momentous and significant, whether it was a conversation with God or a confrontation with an illness-causing spirit that, in turn, produces a religious conversion of an individual, a family, or a community. Third, and most important, oral history helps researchers to understand the meaning of these events. Oral history allows people to tell their stories and to speak freely of their spiritual encounters and their religious imaginations. Through these stories, researchers are better able to understand what matters to the people whom they study. Moreover, through listening, historians are better able to see events, meanings, and even beings that would remain, without oral history, unknown, unfamiliar, and invisible.

Oral history has particular value for religious historians. Oral history helps scholars to understand the practices, rituals, and acts of devotion that people regularly pursue and that are not documented in church records. It is a valuable tool for religious historians who study “lived religion” and who study people whose religious lives are centered on practices, rather than beliefs. It also offers scholars the tools to study religious beliefs and practices that are not institutionalized and that are not found in formal churches or church-like settings, but, rather, in homes or in nature settings, as is the case for a great number of Asian and indigenous religious traditions. Finally, oral history enables researchers to understand the spiritual worlds in which Hmong people reside, to understand the unseen world as Hmong people see and participate in it.

Several collections of oral histories and memoirs have been published or deposited in libraries in California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. In addition to these collections, I conducted forty original interviews with Hmong individuals, resettlement workers, religious leaders, and government officials. I conducted the interviews in English and in two dialects of Hmong, with

the aid of Maile Vue, a translator, cultural broker, and a longtime resident of the Twin Cities. I used the snowball method to identify potential participants, and I also received guidance and contacts through the Hmong Cultural Center and the Center for Hmong Studies at Concordia University. I took care to select a base of oral history narrators who represent diverse perspectives from within the Hmong community, with efforts to include religious, generational, and gender diversity, as well as clan leaders and ritual specialists, such as shamans and funeral chanters. Whenever possible, I interviewed Hmong refugees who were resettled directly by congregations in the Twin Cities. In selecting church volunteers to interview, I contacted the local affiliates of the voluntary agencies, church-affiliated refugee assistance programs, and the local offices of the Christian denominations that I knew were most active in resettlement. I also identified sponsoring congregations and potential oral history narrators through written documents, particularly local religious newspapers and the congregational documents available at the Minnesota Historical Society and the Luther Seminary Archive.

In conducting the interviews, I followed the Oral History Association's guidelines for best practices. Every interview had two parts, a pre-interview meeting at which I explained my research project and answered questions, as well as a recorded session. I gave all interview participants the opportunity to review the interviews afterward and place any restrictions that they felt were necessary. Prior to contacting potential oral history narrators, I made arrangements for interview deposit and donation at three separate archives that reflected the background and interests of the narrators: the Southeast Asian Archive at the University of California, Irvine; the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America Archive in Elk Grove, Illinois; and the Luther Seminary Archive in Saint Paul, Minnesota. I chose these particular archives on the basis of their commitment to serve the ethnic and religious communities at their focus, as well as their

capability to accept and preserve digital recordings. I offered every interview participant the opportunity to donate their interview to any, or all, of these archives, as both a protection for them and a service to the broader community. Hmong participants, in particular, expressed interest in having their stories archived, and several said that the opportunity to donate their interviews and preserve their stories for future generations of Hmong Americans to hear were the reasons why they chose to participate in the interview.

On Terminology

Hmong people do not have a native concept of religion, nor even a word for it, and their beliefs and rituals have never easily fit into a Western conception of religion. Historically, Hmong people have described their beliefs and rituals as their “custom” or “way,” although attitudes and practices about describing Hmong beliefs and practices as religion are changing. What should scholars do?

I choose to use the word religion—defined broadly—to describe Hmong beliefs and rituals, largely because many of the Hmong Americans whom I interviewed chose to use this term themselves. Many scholars of Hmong life in Asia have interpreted Hmong indigenous traditions as religion, and many Americans who have encountered Hmong people in Asia and the United States have interpreted their beliefs and practices as religion, too. I acknowledge that some Hmong people have been uncomfortable with applying the term religion to Hmong traditions, preferring the language of spiritualism and culture. However, I find the term religion to be a useful interpretive aid in making sense of the whole of Hmong spiritual beliefs and ritual traditions. Although not all Hmong people may describe their tradition as religion, my decision

to do so is an act of scholarly interpretation, a pursuit of a framework that assists in understanding patterns of Hmong belief, meaning, and practice in the United States. This choice in terminology also arises from my general interest in broadening how scholars deploy the language of religion.

I choose to include shamanism under the category of Hmong religion for similar reasons. As discussed earlier, the application of the term “religion” to describe Hmong shamanism has provoked controversy, particularly among anthropologists. And yet, for a variety of purposes, many people have described shamanism as religious in nature. Some have done so with the agenda of declaring shamanism as incompatible with Christianity: both Hmong and non-Hmong Christians, particularly evangelical Protestant Christians, have constructed shamanism as a set of deviant rituals that contradicts core teachings of Christianity. In addition, Hmong people who themselves practice shamanism have described its rituals in religious terms. Some American institutions—churches and hospitals, for example—have drawn parallels between shamans and Christian clergy. Finally, Hmong shamans, upon coming to the United States, have expressed great concern that the widespread adoption of Christianity in the Hmong American community has threatened the future of Hmong shamanism. In this way, shamans, too, have participated in the construction of shamanism as the oppositional equivalent of Christianity. That Hmong Americans, in a break from the past, have manufactured shamanism as a set of beliefs and practices that deserves respect and accommodation as a religion demands that scholars, in turn, recognize, understand, and engage in these new labels and meanings, rather than deny and discipline them, and this is why I consider shamanism in whatever I describe as Hmong religion.

Finally, I choose to describe Hmong traditions as “indigenous Hmong religion,” for several reasons. First, it is an inclusive term, one intended to depart from Christian-centric

definitions of “religion.” The label “indigenous religion,” also known as “ethnic religion” or “local religion,” illuminates the prominence of landscape and locality in Hmong spiritual life. In addition, it draws useful connections between the Hmong and other peoples who have endured in the face of colonization and globalization.⁴⁸ The story of indigenous Hmong religion in America calls attention to the need to understand both the historical and contemporary experiences of ethnic communities whose beliefs and practices lay beyond the great “world religions” and remain little understood.

⁴⁸ For an overview of indigenous religion and “local religious societies,” see Juha Pentikäinen, “Local Religious Societies,” in *The Global Religions: An Introduction*, ed. Mark Juergensmeyer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 87–92. For an example of an indigenous group that has also grappled with the politics of claiming religion, see Tisa Wenger, *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

Chapter One:

Religious Encounters in Laos and Thailand

The plane crash: it was ordained by God. So thought Ed Roffe, Laos Field Chairman and missionary with the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA). A surprise rut on the runway had interfered with the takeoff, and as he inspected the torn nose-wheel and fractured propeller on the aircraft, he realized that the plane was too damaged to fly. With no replacement parts readily available, he was stranded, and yet it occurred to him that it was God's plan to keep him there, in Xieng Khouang, a remote mountainous province in Laos. Roffe had first flown to Xieng Khouang to respond to an urgent telegram from Ted Andrianoff, a fellow missionary, who reported the exhilarating news that he had helped win one thousand Hmong converts. Roffe had planned to help Andrianoff for a short period of time before returning by plane to his home in Luang Prabang. But after he examined the dismal state of his airplane, he stopped to examine his heart: yes, God intended him to stay and to continue to help share the Gospel with the Hmong people.¹

Years later, Young Tao, a Hmong pastor living in Minnesota, recalled his own miraculous experience on a plane field in Xieng Khouang. On that plane field, he had a vision: instead of seeing aircraft on the field, he saw an enormous elephant eating the leaves of a towering tree. Another elephant, as huge and as hungry as the first, arrived on the scene, and the elephants began to battle over the remaining leaves. Amid this fighting, Young Tao heard a

¹ Ted Andrianoff and Ruth Andrianoff, *Chosen by The God of Grace: The Story of The Birth of The Hmong Church Through the Eyes of Ted and Ruth Andrianoff*. (Camp Hill: Christian Publications, Inc., 2000), 12-14.

booming voice delivering a divine message. “The voice said from above, said again and again, and interpreted that God has given Laos to the Communist,” he recalled. Soon after hearing this message, Young Tao earnestly began to carry out the mission that he believed God had called him to do. He knocked on doors and urged Hmong people to pray and to confess their sins. The communists did indeed gain control of Laos in May 1975, as the divine voice had told him would happen, and Young Tao believed that, through these political events, “God opened a door for the Hmong people.” Hmong people, Young Tao said, came to the United States not because they had been faithful to the Americans who had lost the war, but because Young Tao was faithful to God in delivering Hmong people to Christianity.²

Resettlement in the United States generated important religious changes in the lives of Hmong refugees, but the story in fact begins in Asia, in places like Xieng Khouang, where missionaries like Ed Roff and Ted Andrianoff appealed to Hmong people to “enter Jesus” and where Hmong people like Young Tao constructed their own meanings of Christianity. These pre-migration missionary encounters in Laos and Thailand laid the foundation for the interreligious encounters of refugee resettlement in several ways. For one, missionary contact in Laos and Thailand shaped the trajectory of Hmong religious life by contributing to the formation of a core group of Christians, particularly evangelical Christians, who would later establish influential Hmong churches in the United States. Missionary work in Asia also laid the foundation for how Hmong people understood Christianity as “the new way” and responded to close contact with Christian missionary sponsors in the United States. Finally, encounters between Hmong people

² Folder 62, Box 2, The Refugee Studies Center, University of Minnesota Records, General/Multiethnic Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

and Christian missionaries in Asia introduced American Christians to indigenous Hmong religion and offered an early opportunity to apprehend and to attempt to accommodate Hmong traditions, especially in the context of refugee services.

Underlying these encounters between Hmong people and Christian missionaries is the fundamental question of what, precisely, Hmong religion is, if the Hmong people truly have a religion. Christian missionaries in Laos and Christian volunteers serving in humanitarian missions in Thailand both grappled with making sense of a set of beliefs and practices that they interpreted, variously, as demon-worship, primitive superstition, and colorful cultural practice. For Hmong people, it was just their “way,” although they, too, faced the curious challenge of how to make sense of it as a religion as they began to prepare for life in the United States.

“In Laos there was much magic”

Nearly 100,000 of the seven million Hmong worldwide currently reside in the United States, but until the last quarter of the twentieth century, the Hmong lived almost exclusively in Asia, particularly the highlands of Southeast Asia. Most were subsistence farmers who raised livestock and occasionally grew opium poppies for profit. In these secluded mountain villages, Hmong people practiced an indigenous religion that combines animism, Buddhism, shamanism, and the worship of natural spirits and ancestors.³ In Hmong cosmology, two worlds exist: the

³ Graham Harvey defines animists as “people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others.” Harvey’s definition of animism as an effort to pursue “respectful relationships” with other beings marks a departure from an older definition of animism that emphasizes a “belief in spirits.” While Harvey acknowledges that the term animism carries the baggage of colonialism, he points out that diverse communities have continued to find it to be a useful term of self-description. For this project, I choose to use the term because many Hmong American people have chosen to use

unseen spirit world of the *yeeb ceen*, where a great variety of gods, ancestral spirits, and nature-based spirits reside; and the visible realm of *yaj ceeb*, in which human beings, material things, and nature live. By guiding human relations in these two domains, indigenous Hmong religion preserves a delicate social balance and peaceable relations with kin, ancestors, and the natural world.

Indigenous Hmong religion involves a wide array of rituals, which vary by region, community, and clan. However, according to Vincent Her, these household-based rituals advance several common objectives:

- Maintaining spiritual health and harmony within the individual and family
- Remembering the ancestors and deceased members of the family through various offerings
- Ensuring continuity of the person and soul, from one generation to the next and from this life to the other.⁴

Through a variety of seasonal and life cycle rituals and through regular offerings of food and incense, indigenous Hmong religion emphasizes reverence of the ancestors, believed to intervene in the affairs of the living. As an earth-centered tradition that recognizes the omnipresence of spirits in the natural world, it also reflects the agricultural lives of Hmong people, their dependence on the benevolence of nature, and their desire for abundant harvests and enduring health. Finally, shamanism—which anthropologists Gary Yia Lee and Nicholas Tapp described as “a system for curing illness and other forms of social unhappiness and disharmony”—offers

this term to describe themselves. See Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

⁴ Her, “Hmong Cosmology: Proposed Model, Preliminary Insights,” 1.

the ritual tools to cope with a wide range of bodily, social, and natural calamities in a single institution that serves legal, medical, political, and social purposes.⁵

Also known as *txiv neeb*, shamans play a principal role in the Hmong spiritual community as the only humans who can communicate with the unseen world on behalf of the living. Hmong people have traditionally understood illness to be a problem related to the wandering off or capturing of one or more souls, of which Hmong people possess several. Many Hmong ceremonies demand that the *txiv neeb* find, chase, or recapture the lost soul, thus restoring well-being and belief to the afflicted. In a *hu plig* ceremony, a shaman calls the soul home, luring it with chants and offers of food. In the ritual *ua neeb*, the soul must be chased, captured, or bought back. The *txiv neeb* enters a trance, which enables his passage into the spirit world, where he communes with the spirits and bargains for the health of the afflicted. Meanwhile, family members burn joss paper, sacrifice animals, offer blessings, and tie strings around wrists in *khi tes* ceremonies.⁶ Paja Thao, a Hmong man from Laos who resettled in the United States and who served the Hmong American community as a shaman throughout the 1980s, described his work to the anthropologist Dwight Conquergood:

Saub gives you power to help the soul
To catch and protect the soul
If you follow this way
Truly you can catch the soul
And the sick one will feel better

⁵ Lee and Tapp, *Culture and Customs of the Hmong*; Jacques Lemoine, “The Constitution of a Hmong Shaman’s Powers of Healing and Folk Culture,” *Shaman* 4, no. 1 and 2 (1996): 144–165; Eric Crystal, “Hmong Religion,” in *The Asian American Encyclopedia*, ed. Franklin Ng (New York: Marshall Cavendish, 1995); Tapp, “Hmong Religion”; Mottin, “A Hmong Shaman’s Seance”; Chindarsi, *The Religion of the Hmong Njua*.

⁶ Dia Cha, interview by Paul Hillmer, October 5, 2005, Hmong Oral History Project, Concordia University, transcript, accessed January 18, 2014, http://homepages.csp.edu/hillmer/Interviews/Dr._Dia_Cha.html.

You go to catch the soul with your two hands
And with your heart
And you grip the soul
After that, the sick one feels better too⁷

Aside from performing rituals and serving as the primary liaisons between the *yeeb ceen* and *yaj ceeb*, shamans also function as respected community leaders and teachers in traditional Hmong society. “Shamans are important individuals in Hmong society,” said Boua Neng Moua, a Hmong man who came to the United States after the war in Laos. “They give us guidance and advice. When Hmong people move, they ask a shaman to tell them where to go and how to get there safely. Shamans are very powerful individuals because they influence many people who act on the basis of what they say.”⁸

Living in the Lao highlands, where rains and rugged territory cut off contact with outsiders for many months of the year, the Hmong resided in relative isolation. Although they encountered a few missionaries in the decades before the Vietnam War, the authority of the *txiv neeb* and the integrity of indigenous Hmong religion rarely faced challenges because the seclusion of Hmong mountain villages limited the interaction that often accompanies regular exposure to peoples of competing customs and beliefs. Under these conditions, ethnic and religious boundaries were largely coterminous with geographic boundaries. Wang Kao Her recalled that it took several days of travel to encounter any Christians at all, as they concentrated in Xieng Khouang. “It took us two days to reach Xieng Khouang,” he said. “There were not any nice flat roadways, only small trails up and down mountain ranges. If we wanted to go to the

⁷ Thao and Conquergood, *I Am a Shaman*, 5.

⁸ Boua Neng Moua, “Boua Neng Moua’s Story,” in *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos and America*, ed. Sucheng Chan (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 211.

church in Xieng Khouang, we had to travel one whole day and by nightfall we would reach and sleep at the village of Cahum. From there to Xieng Khouang was still another day of walking.”⁹

Given the remoteness of their villages and the centrality of indigenous Hmong religion in their daily life, the vast majority of Lao Hmong found little need to make distinctions between the religious and non-religious elements of their lives. For the Lao Hmong living in these conditions in the decades before the war, beliefs and rituals were woven into the practices of daily life and the meaning of being Hmong, and religious and cultural identities were inextricably intertwined. Being Hmong meant practicing indigenous Hmong religion, which is “the main core of our culture,” said Shone Yang, a Hmong man resettled in the United States.¹⁰ Nao Thao, a shaman who resettled in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, and later in Saint Paul, recalled how her parents, who were also shamans, understood their traditional beliefs and practices when they were living in Laos. To them, she said, Hmong rituals were not a “religion” or a “culture,” and there was little self-conscious effort to differentiate Hmong traditions from those of lowland Lao Buddhists or foreign Christian missionaries. “Back then, I didn’t compare too much about these things—[as in] ‘Oh, this is what we do, this is not what we do,’” she said. Rather, she understood *ua neeb ua yaig*, or Hmong shamanism, as simply the “way”—*kev*—of Hmong people. “This is what we did, and this is what we do,” she said, matter-of-factly.¹¹

⁹ Wang Her, interview by Peter Chou Vang, Hmong Oral History Project, Concordia University, transcript, accessed January 18, 2014, http://homepages.csp.edu/hillmer/Interviews/Wang_Her.html.

¹⁰ Shone Yang in Lillian Faderman, *I Begin My Life All Over: The Hmong and the American Immigrant Experience* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 116.

¹¹ Nao Thao, interview by the author, September 11, 2012, Saint Paul, Minnesota, digital recording at part 10.

In the memory of Hmong refugees resettled in the United States, the Lao highlands were a unique spiritual landscape, a setting that was fundamentally changed by the same war that forced the Hmong to flee to Thailand. Stories told by Hmong people living in diaspora reveal a palpable nostalgia for the mountains that their people, their ancestors, and their gods once called home. “In Laos there was much magic,” recalled Doua Vang, a shaman in California. “For instance, in Seng Tong there was a god whom we offered gifts to yearly. This ensured us that everyone in the village would have a good harvest season and everyone would be in good health. This god, Dab Phuaj Thaub, used to live in the mountains of Phuaj Thaub, but that is all gone now because of a landing strip for airplanes has been built on the mountain.”¹²

“Our God is stronger than any evil spirits”

Although Hmong people have famously lived in hard-to-reach places, missionaries were able to make successful contact with them in Asia. At the end of the nineteenth century, Roman Catholic missionaries from the Paris Foreign Missions Society and China Inland Mission worked with Hmong people in Guizhou and Yunnan Provinces and in northern Vietnam. Most notably, Samuel Pollard of the Bible Christian movement worked in Yunnan Province, where he built churches, schools, and medical clinics; distributed the first Hmong translation of the Bible; and created the first script for the Hmong language. In Laos, the first Catholic missionaries arrived in the seventeenth century, with disastrous results, but in 1934 Pope Pius XI revived missionary activity there and sent priests of the Oblates of the order of Mary Immaculate. Finally, evangelical Protestant missionaries from the Christian and Missionary Alliance pursued several

¹² Doua Vang in Faderman, *I Begin My Life All Over*, 28.

projects that became one of most influential missions on the religious trajectories of Hmong Americans.¹³ Though a relatively small denomination in the broader American population, the CMA today is the church of choice for a plurality of Hmong Christians. In 2008, there were eighty-seven Hmong CMA congregations across the United States, and in the Twin Cities, the Saint Paul Hmong Alliance Church, another CMA congregation, had nearly 3,000 members by 2005.¹⁴

How did Christian missionaries, especially CMA missionaries, understand and work with the Hmong people they encountered in Laos? Two couples, Ted and Ruth Andrianoff and Malcolm and Helen Sawyer, were part of the CMA's field team in Laos during the 1950s and 1960s and served the Hmong and other highland ethnic groups in Laos during what Timothy Yang has described as the era of a great "people movement," a period when large numbers of Hmong people adopted Christianity.¹⁵ Oral history interviews and the autobiographical pamphlets that they later wrote about their experiences offer a glimpse into the religious imaginations of mid-century evangelical missionaries and their engagement with the spiritual worlds of the Hmong.

¹³ For a discussion of Christian missionary work among the Hmong in Asia, see Lewis, "The Western Protestant Missionaries and the Miao in Yunnan and Guizhou, Southwest China"; Cheung, "Millenarianism, Christian Movements, and Ethnic Change Among the Miao in Southwest China"; Sucheng Chan, "The Hmong Experience in Asia and the United States," in *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos and America*, ed. Sucheng Chan (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 1–60; Tapp, "The Impact of Missionary Christianity upon Marginalized Ethnic Minorities."

¹⁴ Vang, *Hmong America*, 87.

¹⁵ Timothy Vang, "Coming a Full Circle: Historical Analysis of the Hmong Church Growth 1950-1998" (D.Min. Dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1998).

In Laos, Christian and Missionary Alliance missionaries encountered a Hmong community that inhabited a lively and complex supernatural landscape populated not simply by deities and spirits but, in the eyes of the missionaries, by fundamentally evil spirits. Hmong people themselves did not necessarily consider these spirits to be “demons” and “devils,” as the Sawyers and Andrianoffs did. “Prior to contact with Christian missionaries, Hmong didn't perceive *Ntxwg Nyug* [one of the Hmong deities] as the ‘Devil,’” explained Dia Cha, a Hmong anthropologist. “It's the missionaries who labeled him as such. He is just an important figure in the Other World.”¹⁶ For the Sawyers and the Andrianoffs, however, the understanding of Hmong deities as essentially malevolent was central to how they perceived indigenous Hmong religion. Malcolm Sawyer recalled that most of the Hmong rituals consisted of “spirit worship, appeasing the evil spirits by doing.”¹⁷ In his view, the evil spirits were rarely ever placated, and Hmong people were forever enslaved to these demons. John and Ruth Andrianoff saw the conversion of Hmong people in Laos as a moment when “the God of Grace did indeed step into Hmong history to deliver these people from bondage to the spirits, just as He had promised.”¹⁸

The Sawyers and the Andrianoffs did not dismiss these evil spirits as figments of primitive imaginations as others later did, but took them—and the spiritual threat they posed—seriously. The devils and demons of the Hmong religious world were real enemies with whom Christian missionaries were engaged in spiritual battle. This belief critically shaped how

¹⁶ Dia Cha, interview transcript.

¹⁷ Malcolm Maurice Sawyer, interview by Robert Shuster, November 14, 1983, Wheaton, Illinois, Collection 256, Archives of the Billy Graham Center, transcript, accessed January 18, 2014, <http://www2.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/trans/256t02.htm>.

¹⁸ Andrianoff and Andrianoff, *Chosen by The God of Grace: The Story of The Birth of The Hmong Church Through the Eyes of Ted and Ruth Andrianoff*, 28.

missionaries strategized their outreach to the Hmong. As the Andrianoffs recalled, an assistant to the missionary couple named Nai Kheng decided, with the input of Ted Andrianoff, to live in a house that was famous in the village for being “possessed by evil spirits.” Living in the spirit-possessed home, they believed, would be ideal because “it will show that our God is stronger than any evil spirits.” According to the retelling of their first successful conversion, the plan worked: a powerful shaman named Moua Yia was impressed that Nai Kheng was able to stay in the haunted house and had not been scared away by the spirits. “Their God must be more powerful than the spirits,” Moua Yia reportedly said. “If there is a God that mighty, I want to worship him, too.”¹⁹ The Andrianoffs explained that even the spirits to which the Hmong were held in bondage sometimes “announced the truth of the Gospel.” “Not that the spirits always left compliantly—there was often much spiritual opposition to the proclamation of the Good News,” they wrote. “But just as in the days of Jesus, the spirits seemed to be compelled to acknowledge the truth of the message.”²⁰ Malcolm Sawyer, too, described how he regularly did battle with the evil spirits, not only in Laos, but even in the United States. “I’ve had occasions here in the United States to cast out evil spirits out of people,” he said. In Laos, he and his wife “always threw out evil spirit worship in the name of Christ, and prayed constantly.”²¹

While the Sawyers and the Andrianoffs did not take the encounter with Hmong “demons” casually, they tended to describe Hmong beliefs and practices as “spirit worship” and rarely, if ever, elevated Hmong beliefs and practices to the status of a legitimate religion. Moreover, they consistently described Hmong ritual objects as “fetishes,” which was the first target for

¹⁹ Ibid., 6-7.

²⁰ Ibid., 20.

²¹ Malcolm Maurice Sawyer, interview transcript, November 14, 1983.

destruction whenever a Hmong person expressed a desire to “enter Jesus.” When Moua Yia said that he was ready to become a Christian, the Andrianoffs recalled how they sprang to action. “Nai Kheng and Moua Yia began removing the spirit fetishes from the chief’s home,” they wrote. “They threw them into a pile behind the house and began going from house to house, taking down all the fetishes and collecting spirit-related ornaments people were wearing. Flames from the fire rose five meters into the air. Afterward the people returned joyfully to their homes, free from the spirit bondage under which they had been living.”²²

Both the aggressive destruction of Hmong sacred objects and the use of the term “fetish” reflected the missionaries’ evaluation of Hmong traditions as primitive, artificial, and unstable. Such a physical and semantic assault on these ritual objects was not unique to the Sawyers’ and Andrianoffs’ work with Hmong people, but characteristic of many interactions between missionaries and adherents of indigenous religious traditions the world over. The term “fetish,” David Chidester argued, derives from the Latin *facere*—“to make or to do”—and thus refers to an item “uncertain meaning or unstable value” that is “artificial, illicit, or evil making.” “Unlike the historical continuity and social solidarity represented by the church, therefore, the fetish provides a model for religion in which religion is inherently unstable,” he explained. “As an object of indeterminate meaning and variable value, the fetish represents an unstable center for a shifting constellation of religious symbols. Although the fetishized object might inspire religious moods and motivations, it is constantly at risk of being unmasked as something made and

²² Andrianoff and Andrianoff, *Chosen by The God of Grace: The Story of The Birth of The Hmong Church Through the Eyes of Ted and Ruth Andrianoff*, 10.

therefore as an artificial focus for religious desire.”²³ In the us/them encounter between Hmong people and Christian and Missionary Alliance missionaries, the deployment of the term “fetish” was an act of denying the legitimacy of indigenous Hmong religion, which they framed as manufactured, primitive, and demonic.

If Christian missionaries interpreted indigenous Hmong religion as evil, primitive, and artificial, lowland Lao Buddhists also dismissed Hmong traditions. Like the Sawyers and the Andrianoffs, they asserted that the Hmong lacked a true religion. “We were tolerated [in Laos] and were allowed to stay there and the [Lao] people did not oppose us openly at all,” said Helen Sawyer. “But they also did not accept the religion very easily. They said the missionaries were there preaching the Gospel and it was fine for the tribal people who were animists who had fear of evil spirits and this kind of thing. And they said they had a religion, Buddhist religion. The others didn't have a real religion.”²⁴ In claiming a religion—Buddhism—lowland Lao people made a claim of civilizational equality. Helen Sawyer recalled that Lao people said “that Buddhism was older than the Christian religion, Buddhism was the national religion of the country, that we should not be trying to make converts out of the Lao people, because they already had a religion and it was a good religion, the same as ours.”²⁵ In contrast, “[t]he tribal people were spirit worshippers, so when the tribal people became Christians, the Lao people themselves laughed at ‘em and said, ‘Well, they don't have a religion really. All they do is fear

²³ Daniel Chidester, “The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock ‘n’ Roll: Theoretical Models for the Study of Religion in American Popular Culture,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 4 (1996), 751-752.

²⁴ Helen Irvin Sawyer, interview by Stephanie Dixon, November 30, 1983, Wheaton, Illinois, Collection 256, Archives of the Billy Graham Center, transcript, accessed January 18, 2014, <http://www2.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/trans/256t04.htm>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

evil spirits. They don't really have a religion. We have Buddha, the Christians have Christ. They have nothing, so they've taken the Christian's Christ.”²⁶

These observations were, to a degree, true: compared to Lao Buddhists, missionaries had their greatest success among hilltribe groups such as the Hmong, the Miao, and the Khamu—groups that were “spirit worshippers.” Missionaries recalled facilitating hundreds of conversions among the Hmong. Many of these conversions involved dramatic and symbolic acts that expressed a “complete break with the spirits.”²⁷ “[W]hen they become Christian, all that stuff is thrown away,” Malcolm Sawyer said. “The objects in their house are thrown away. They're burned. The altars outside the villages - burned and... and cut down and thrown away. And the strings are cut off. We've cut off many [laughs] hundreds and hundreds and thousands of strings from people and taken the paraphernalia off their necks and so forth. And they become Christian.”²⁸ Still, even missionaries acknowledged that there might have been practical reasons for Hmong conversions. For one, the animal sacrifices necessary for Hmong rituals were expensive and burdensome for poor Hmong families. “Sometimes they would sacrifice meat and cattle that they ought to be having for food,” explained Helen Sawyer. “They sacrificed to please spirits, which kept them poor all the time they said.”²⁹ In addition, she knew that many Hmong people considered conversion to Christianity as a means of improving educational opportunities.

²⁶ Helen Irvin Sawyer, interview by Stephanie Dixon, November 22, 1983, Wheaton, Illinois, Collection 256, Archives of the Billy Graham Center, transcript, accessed January 18, 2014, <http://www2.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/trans/256t03.htm>.

²⁷ Andrianoff and Andrianoff, *Chosen by The God of Grace: The Story of The Birth of The Hmong Church Through the Eyes of Ted and Ruth Andrianoff*, 7.

²⁸ Malcolm Maurice Sawyer, interview transcript, November 14, 1983.

²⁹ Helen Irvin Sawyer, interview transcript, November 30, 1983.

“And some I know became Christians because they wanted education for their children, wanted a better way of life,” Helen Sawyer said. “I’m sure that was in the minds of some of the people, especially ambitious, aggressive Hmong tribal people, who wanted to better their standard of living and everything else.”³⁰

“A people movement”

Missionary encounters in Asia shaped not only how American Christians—and their associated voluntary agencies and churches—understood and related to indigenous Hmong religion, but also how Hmong people interpreted and approached Christianity. Hmong encounters with foreign missionaries visiting Laos introduced Christian beliefs to Hmong communities and led to the growth of a small, but influential Hmong Christian population. From these pre-migration interactions arose enduring cultural attitudes about Christianity and religious change that shaped the religious choices of Hmong refugees as they navigated their close encounter with Christianity throughout their refugee migration and resettlement in the United States. This prior religious contact in China, Laos, and Thailand was significant in two ways: first, it introduced the possibility of Christianity as providing an alternative solution to both

³⁰ Helen Irvin Sawyer, interview transcript, November 22, 1983. Nicholas Tapp argued that Christian missionaries have achieved greatest success in winning converts among people who do not belong to a “world religion,” partly because “material and economic factors have influenced the minorities’ greater willingness to accept the Christian creed, since all too often the ethnic minorities with whom Christian missionaries have worked were in seriously impoverished, powerless and economically deprived material situations in relationship to the material situations of the numerically majority populations.” Such converts are known as “rice-bowl” Christians. See Tapp, “The Impact of Missionary Christianity Upon Marginalized Ethnic Minorities,” 70.

practical and spiritual problems; and second, it established Christianity as a “new” religion in the Hmong cultural and religious imagination.

Although Hmong encounters with Christianity in Asia influenced Hmong religious choices in the United States, in general, Hmong people had only limited interaction with Christian missionaries in Laos. “No, we would never meet them,” said Houa Vue Moua. That many Hmong people lived in the highlands meant that they had little contact with missionaries. “They never reach out to our place,” she recalled. “We never heard about them, we never saw them...the priests, the Christian, were able to reach out to the Hmong [in the city] but not our people, not our area.”³¹ While some Christian and Missionary Alliance missionaries were able to reach more isolated, highland territory, the possibility of contact with Christian missionaries increased in the lowland urban areas of Laos. Gary Yia Lee, for example, recalled that he had attended a Catholic church, but had done so in the capital of Vientiane.³²

The conversion stories of Hmong people who met missionaries and became Christian in Laos suggest that Christianity appealed to Hmong people who were searching for new ways to solve spiritual and spirit-related health problems. Hmong people have traditionally practiced shamanism as way of mediating relations with the spirit world in order to seek healing and promote spiritual and bodily well being, and, similarly, early Hmong converts believed that Christianity could offer healing and protection from sickness, too. Timothy Vang, who became a leading Christian and Missionary Alliance minister in Maplewood, Minnesota, explained how a visiting relative introduced his father to Christianity when they were still living in Laos:

³¹ Houa Vue Moua and Yong Kaye Moua, interview by the author, September 12, 2012, Saint Paul, Minnesota, digital recording at part 16.

³² Gary Yia Lee, interview by Paul Hillmer, December 30, 2005, Hmong Oral History Project, Concordia University, transcript, accessed January 18, 2014, http://homepages.csp.edu/hillmer/Interviews/Dr._Gary_Yia_Lee.html.

He said, ‘Uncle, your family has been sick all the time. This one is well, the other is sick, and repeating like that, year in, year out. Why don’t you try Christianity? Why don’t you try Jesus? Jesus is the Son of God. (Or they call *Yexus*.) *Yexus* is the Son of God. He came from Heaven to Earth, and he healed people who were sick, just like your family. I have become a Christian, so why don’t you try?’

Timothy Vang’s father thought about what his relative had said, and he assembled his sons, to whom he said, “*Yexus* came to Earth to help people, and if we accept Jesus, we do not have to do this kind of shamanism, spiritism anymore.” The father was enthusiastic about becoming Christian, and his sons agreed to follow him. “So we just called that man again to come and pray for us, and he came to pray for us,” Timothy Vang said. “He took away the altar, the fetishes, everything outside and burned them.”³³

Like Timothy Vang’s father, Shong Yang’s parents believed that adopting Christianity would offer security against sickness. “[E]ven after killing all the pigs and all that stuff, it still didn’t help our family,” Shong Yang said. “So, finally, at that time—I would say I was about six years old—we heard about Christians, about converting, and so my parents decided that they were going to convert because it doesn’t matter how much animals we killed—to do the rituals, it doesn’t seem to help.” His parents had long been frustrated with the inefficacy of shamanism. “Doing the rituals always had failed us so many times because everybody was sick all the time, and we would use so many sets of baby pigs that were slaughtered for numbers of years, and it has never helped,” he said. “And so they just had enough of it... if it doesn’t help, then why should we even continue?” For this reason, his parents were eager to find a new, more effective way to guarantee the health of their family. “[W]hen they heard of Christianity and [people] saying that when you become Christian, you’re going to get better, you’re not going to be sick,

³³ Timothy Vang, interview by the author, September 20, 2012, Maplewood, Minnesota, digital recording at part 4-5.

and you don't have to do things in that [ritual] order anymore," Shong Yang said, "that's when my parents decided that we were going to be converted, for that purpose, so that we're not afraid of being sick." It is not clear if becoming Christian also brought increased access to modern medicine, better food, or other material benefits that could have had a positive impact on health. Nevertheless, the causal link between adopting Christianity and becoming well, spiritually and bodily, was certain to him. "After we were converted," he said, "we were a lot healthier."³⁴

Bee Yang also noticed that her children were healthier after her family became Christian. Before her conversion, she had lost six of her fourteen children—"my children kept dying," she said—and she converted to Christianity for the sake of saving her remaining children. "[A]s soon as I was converted to being a Christian, then my other children that I had after had survived," she said. Christianity gave her a new set of rituals, a direct way to intervene in her children's health, and a greater sense of agency. "[M]y kids, they were sick, but after we prayed for them, they get better," she said. She also found that she herself "felt a lot better" and "wasn't having so much deep sorrows" after becoming Christian.³⁵ When Hmong Christians enjoyed improved health, their wellbeing confirmed the rightness of the decision to convert to Christianity. Wang Her noticed a great change in his health when he became Christian. "Before I was a Christian, I constantly had fevers," he explained. "After becoming a Christian my fevers were gone, and I

³⁴ Soua Lo and Shong Yang, interview by the author, translated by Maile Vue, August 6, 2012, Saint Paul, Minnesota, part 11-12.

³⁵ Bee Yang, interview by the author, translated by Maile Vue, August 2, 2012, Saint Paul, Minnesota, part 1-2. See also Kim Yang, OH 86.17, Oral History Interviews of the Hmong Women's Action Team Oral History Project (Hmoob Thaj Yeeb Oral History Project) 1999-2000, Minnesota Historical Society, transcript, p. 11.

was not allergic to certain types of food anymore. To this day I have not experienced the same type of fevers or food allergies I used to experience before I became a Christian.”³⁶

Others believed that Christianity would offer a solution to spiritual problems, such as curses. PaMang Her recalled how one clan adopted Christianity because of a curse that they had suffered. “The Hers had what they called a curse,” he said. Many members of the clan had suffered, and from a variety of calamities: opium addiction, poverty, early death, infertility. “The Hers were really scared,” he recalled, “so when they heard that if you became a believer that you'd be OK, they started to believe and God helped them and they escaped the curse.”³⁷

In addition to establishing a conversion narrative centered on freedom from sickness and malevolent spirits, these early encounters with Christianity also contributed to an important intellectual construction of Christianity as a “new” way of life, a fact marked linguistically: Hmong people translate the word Christianity into Hmong as *kev cai tshiab*, which literally means “to follow the rule or way.” This understanding of Christianity is present not only in the dictionary, but also in common parlance. For example, when asked by a colleague to identify her religion, You Vang Yang simply said, “I believe in the new religion.” Her friend, May Hang, responded in turn, “You believe in the Christian religion now?” You Vang Yang clarified her statement, saying, “I believe in Christ, believe in God, and believe in Jesus.”³⁸

³⁶ Wang Her, interview transcript.

³⁷ PaMang Her, interview by Peter Chou Vang, translated by Leona Lor, Hmong Oral History Project, Concordia University, transcript, accessed January 18, 2014, http://homepages.csp.edu/hillmer/Interviews/PaMang_Her.html.

³⁸ You Vang Yang, OH 86.8, Oral History Interviews of the Hmong Women's Action Team Oral History Project (Hmoob Thaj Yeeb Oral History Project) 1999-2000, Minnesota Historical Society, transcript, p. 11.

Although Christian missionaries reached a relatively small portion of the Hmong population, their presence concerned Hmong leaders, who believed that this “new way” challenged the “old way” of indigenous Hmong religion. “[I]n our village, my parents would not want to hear anything about Jesus’ name or anyone carry a Bible,” said Jousa Tsu Thao, whose commanding officer had introduced him to Christianity during the war. “Matter of fact, if they know that whoever carry a Bible to our village, the elder people will not even allow them to walk through our village.” Jousa Tsu Thao attributed this hostility to anxiety that the introduction of Christianity would disrupt Hmong rituals and, more broadly, Hmong society. “I think the fear [was that] the Christian interrupt the belief in the altar that they have,” he said. Christians were forbidden from bringing their Bibles inside Hmong homes, which housed the sacred household altar at which Hmong people made offerings to ancestral spirits and performed other rituals. “[T]hey’re afraid that Jesus’s [spirit] might scare their spirits in some way,” he said.³⁹

Christianity was not only “the new way” because it was the way of *Yexus*, but also because many Hmong refugees associated Christianity with Western culture. Throughout the past four decades, debates about Christianity and its compatibility with Hmong tradition and ethnic identity have roiled Hmong American communities. However, even before Hmong refugees arrived in the United States, the process of defining cultural boundaries alongside religious ones had been well underway in Laos, where early encounters with foreign missionaries caused many Hmong people to view religious membership as emblematic of cultural allegiance.

³⁹ Jousa Tsu Thao, interview by the author, September 19, 2012, Roseville, Minnesota, digital recording at part 1.

“The Hmong do not like much to come to the hospital, when they are sick”

The Vietnam War changed life for Hmong people in Laos. Recruited by the CIA to battle against the communists, Hmong soldiers, led by General Vang Pao, backed the United States and served as guerilla fighters in clandestine operations in Laos.⁴⁰ When Saigon fell in 1975, the United States airlifted 2,500 Hmong people from Long Cheng, headquarters of the Hmong guerilla operations. Others began the westward exodus through the jungle and across the Mekong River with hopes of crossing the border into Thailand, where refugees from neighboring Cambodia and Vietnam were also seeking refuge. Despite numerous obstacles, the UNHCR opened operations in Thailand in 1972, and voluntary agencies were ready to assist Hmong and other refugees by 1975.⁴¹ Most Hmong refugees stayed in Thailand for anywhere between a few months and several years, depending on their willingness to seek resettlement, the availability of sponsorship, and the politics of refugee resettlement in the United States, where refugee programs were makeshift and overloaded. Given these circumstances, the refugee camps were crowded and overloaded, too. The most prominent camp for Hmong refugees, Ban Vinai, served 15,000 Hmong refugees when it first opened in 1975; by 1979, that number increased to 25,000 people.⁴² As late as the early 1990s, 40,000 Hmong refugees remained at the site.⁴³

⁴⁰ For overviews of Hmong involvement in clandestine operations in Laos, see Paul Hillmer, *A People's History of the Hmong* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2010); Keith Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat: The Hmong and America's Secret War in Laos* (Spokane: Eastern Washington University Press, 2000); Chan, “Hmong Means Free.”

⁴¹ Lynellyn Long, *Ban Vinai, the Refugee Camp* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 37-41.

⁴² Ban Vinai Information, Orientation Manual, Box 4, American Refugee Committee Records, Minnesota Historical Society.

At Ban Vinai, Hmong refugees persisted in the indigenous religion that they had practiced for centuries and that they had preserved throughout the decade and a half of war and exodus. Life in the refugee camps posed some new challenges to performing traditional rituals. Camp residents had reduced access to livestock necessary for ritual sacrifice, and even if animals were available, the money to pay for them frequently was not. Nao Thao recalled that rituals involving certain shamans were too expensive for some Hmong people in the refugee camps, and people who were too poor to pay high shaman fees might not have sought the help of shamans or practiced certain rituals.⁴⁴ On the whole, though, Ban Vinai and other camps provided a favorable setting for Hmong to pursue traditional religious rituals.⁴⁵ “When I first arrived the sound of the Shamans (Hmong witch doctors) chanting and banging their bells and pots would be heard all night long, all through the camp,” recalled Ginny Ascensao, a nurse who worked with the American Refugee Committee at Ban Vinai from November 1979 until February 1980. Even with excellent medical care available to them, Hmong refugees remained unwilling to visit the hospital unless they were extremely ill. “They continue to utilize their own Shamans initially for treatment,” she explained, although over time shamans became less active as Hmong refugees became healthier and healing rituals less necessary.⁴⁶

⁴³ Vang, *Hmong America*, 40.

⁴⁴ Nao Thao, interview, digital recording at part 10.

⁴⁵ In planning Ban Vinai, General Vang Pao and other Hmong leaders organized the camp to suit traditional Hmong living patterns. See Long, *Ban Vinai, the Refugee Camp*, 59.

⁴⁶ Ginny Ascensao to the American Refugee Committee, Post Assignment Report, Ban Vinai: Reports and Other Papers, 1979-1980, Box 5, American Refugee Committee Records, Minnesota Historical Society.

The widespread practice of indigenous Hmong religion is a common theme in the accounts told by the Christian medical missionaries working in the refugee camps. For several years, World Vision, an evangelical humanitarian aid organization, provided much of the medical care at Ban Vinai. In Thailand, encounters with Hmong religious beliefs and practices often took place in hospital settings, where Christian missionary doctors served Hmong patients who desired to conduct traditional healing rituals that Western doctors often found to be strange and sometimes exasperating.

The letters and diaries of Lois Visscher, an American internist who worked at Ban Vinai as a medical missionary, reveal one Christian doctor's encounter with indigenous Hmong religion. Visscher arrived at Ban Vinai after a long career as a Christian medical missionary in Africa, India, and Southeast Asia. A devout woman who began each day with Bible study, she approached the work of doctoring as a unique form of Christian witness and deliberately chose to affiliate with Christian hospitals and voluntary agencies. Although she was under the employ of Zuid-Oost-Azie (ZOA), a Dutch medical relief organization affiliated with a group of Reformed church denominations, at Ban Vinai, Visscher worked alongside a Hmong staff and cared primarily for Hmong patients. Her personal papers include a photo album that reveals her affection for her Hmong patients and her deep fascination—and occasional frustration—with Hmong rituals. One series of photographs depicted a Hmong infant tightly wrapped in swaddling blankets and next to a long knife intended “to protect against bad spirits.” Other photographs featured images of Hmong funeral rites. The captions expressed Visscher's deep regret that these deaths were not prevented and that Hmong beliefs about the spiritual origins of illness had prevented the sick from seeking Western medical care. “The Hmong do not like much to come to the hospital, when they are sick,” she wrote. “At first they should ask the shaman and he asks the

spirits. Sometimes is our help then too late. They dress the dead body in the original Hmong dress, if they have and they do a lot of ceremonies.”⁴⁷

Despite their skepticism of the efficacy of Hmong healing methods, practitioners of Western medicine made efforts to accommodate traditional practices. Voluntary agencies established a traditional medical center at Ban Vinai, for example.⁴⁸ Individual physicians like Visscher made ambivalent efforts to tolerate these practices. In a letter dated July 6, 1985, and addressed to her friends in the United States, Visscher described what she saw as a contradiction between Hmong people’s modernity and commitment to tradition. “Yes, Hmong, especially young people, are eager to learn,” she wrote. “They also study English, French, mathematics, etc. But they by no means are ready to give up their old ways.” Visscher described the ways in which the ZOA staff supported what she considered the more benign elements of traditional Hmong medicine. “[Hmong people] have faith in herbalists, and in fact, ZOA has one foreign staff member assisting the herbalists in getting herbs and two Public Health Centers have added a Hmong herbalist to their treatment staff,” she said. “So patients have a choice between medics and herbalists.” Still, she remained suspicious of shamanism, which she saw as a barrier to her own work. “[N]on-Christian Hmong of all ages retain their faith in Shamans or Spirit Healers,” she wrote. “The Hmong may even interrupt our ‘scientific’ modern medicine treatment to have ‘ceremonies’ to appease whatever spirit (of ancestor, usually) is displeased and has brought on

⁴⁷ Photo album, Lois Visscher Papers, Presbyterian Historical Society.

⁴⁸ CCDSPT Medical Subcommittee Minutes, May 12, 1983, CCSDPT Minutes and Meetings, January 5 – July 7, 1983, Box 5, American Refugee Committee Records, Minnesota Historical Society.

the patient's illness. Also, most Hmong are unwilling to accept any immunizations (and yet they love having intravenous fluids given!).”⁴⁹

Though candid about her distrust of Hmong shamanism when communicating with her friends and family, Visscher otherwise appears to have kept her opposition to Hmong practices to herself. Serving as a medical missionary in the 1970s and 1980s, she straddled the boundary between old and new missionary styles. Like the Sawyers and Andrianoffs before her, she prayed regularly that the unsaved souls in her hospital ward would accept Christ as their savior. Like the Sawyers and Andrianoffs, she also considered Hmong beliefs and practices as little more than primitive superstitions. However, she permitted shamans to conduct rituals in her hospital and, in general, accommodated requests by Hmong patients to practice their indigenous rituals. A few factors may have contributed to her tolerance, which contrasted with the hostility displayed by missionaries past. For one, it was a different context: as a medical missionary, her responsibility was to pursue Christian witness primarily through the delivery of medical care to the indigent; the Sawyers and the Andrianoffs had no such obligations. In addition, Visscher served as a missionary in Southeast Asia a full three decades after the Andrianoffs and Sawyers first arrived in Laos, and much had changed during that time. By the time Visscher arrived at Ban Vinai, the practice of openly seeking Christian converts was, in the eyes of many people working at the refugee camps, a violation of UNHCR rules, an inappropriate practice for medical professionals serving refugees, and an outdated, culturally imperialistic mode of missionary work.⁵⁰ Rudolph Skogerboe, a physician from Minnesota who volunteered at Ban Vinai with

⁴⁹ Lois Visscher, Letter from Loei, Thailand, July 6, 1985, Lois Visscher Papers, Presbyterian Historical Society.

⁵⁰ Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America the Contentious History of a Founding Ideal*, 223.

World Vision in 1982, confessed that evangelism at times seemed inappropriate in the face of such urgent need and deep suffering. “One beautiful Hmong woman was suffering because of attempted suicide,” he recalled. “She was depressed and felt hopeless because her family had been killed in Laos.” He realized that “[w]hat she needed was someone to care for her even if it was just a little.” At that moment, he realized that the care she needed was not necessarily a religious message. “I felt it would be a little out of place to preach about the love of God,” he said.⁵¹

“They were just another program there to help”

Rudolph Skogerboe was not just a physician, but also a musician and devout Christian, and one Sunday he was invited to play the horn to accompany the singing of hymns at Sunday services. That morning, however, he found it difficult to concentrate. Although the Hmong preacher was passionate and used a “public address system that was so loud that it could wake the dead,” Skogerboe noticed that “the six hundred plus listeners weren’t listening too well. Through the open windows, hundreds of children were being treated to fresh milk and gifts from the Overseas Christian Relief people. It all seemed more like a circus than a church service.”⁵²

Skogerboe observed from his church pew an important feature of the refugee camps: much of the help came from Christian humanitarian groups. At Ban Vinai and other refugee camps in Thailand, private voluntary agencies offered refugees food, shelter, medical care, and

⁵¹ Rudolph Skogerboe, Ban Vinai Refugee Camp, Ban Vinai: Reports and Other Papers, 1980-1983, Box 5, American Refugee Committee Records, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁵² Ibid.

other services and prepared refugees for third-country resettlement. As would be the case in the United States, the agencies responsible for providing direct assistance to refugees were often religious, church-affiliated agencies. At Ban Vinai, for example, the majority of active agencies were religious organizations: Catholic Relief Services, Compassion and Mercy Associates, Food for the Hungry, and World Vision. The largest of these organizations, World Vision, provided the bulk of refugee assistance programs, including educational, vocational, agricultural, family development programs, and, most importantly, medical care.⁵³

World Vision was a humanitarian organization, and it was also a Christian organization with open missionary purposes and practices that generated conflict at Ban Vinai. Officially, the organization urged its volunteers “to engage in Christian evangelism and witness to non-Christians,” but prohibited proselytizing and coercive efforts to win converts.⁵⁴ The presence of religious agencies nonetheless produced tensions between religious and non-religious voluntary agencies. For example, at one 1982 meeting of medical care providers, a physician protested that the meetings began with prayer, a practice that he considered at odds with the agencies’ stated commitment to “religious neutrality.”⁵⁵ That same year, upon hearing reports of proselytizing in the refugee camps, Robert Van Leeuwen, a representative from the UNHCR, reaffirmed the High Commissioner’s expectations for religious activity—“no proselytizing should take place in association with the provision of such general community services as education, health and

⁵³ Voluntary Agencies’ Programs, Ban Vinai Camp, Orientation Manual, Box 4, American Refugee Committee Records, Minnesota Historical Society

⁵⁴ Ban Vinai Information, Orientation Manual, Box 4, American Refugee Committee Records, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁵⁵ CCDSPT Medical Subcommittee Minutes, August 5, 1982, CCSDPT Minutes and Meetings, June 6 – December 3, 1982, Box 5, American Refugee Committee Records, Minnesota Historical Society.

social welfare, or in connection with the employment of refugee workers”—and urged the agencies to “adjust their activities accordingly.”⁵⁶ Disputes over missionary work referred to principles of religious freedom and religious neutrality, but objections to such religious activities also arose from the very practical concern that proselytizing interfered with the proper care of refugees. An official from the American Refugee Committee described how one UN Program Officer at Ban Vinai was “very down on ‘the evangelical agencies’—World Vision, in particular” because “they didn’t provide enough medical care,” adding that “those agencies which provide medical care without prosethizing [sic] do a better job.”⁵⁷

In looking back on their experience in Thailand, Hmong refugees associated religious organizations in the camps with generous assistance, and some recalled visiting both religious agencies and churches to avail of these resources. True Xiong, for instance, remembered the presence of medical missionaries. “[T]here was a Catholic church where, if you got sick, if you needed a shot, they would give you a shot,” she said, and “if [you] needed some meds, they would give you medications.”⁵⁸ Neng Vang also associated churches with opportunities to attend school. “[In] Laos, they don’t have church, but Thailand, they have big church,” she said. She attended this church because it offered the opportunity to go to school.⁵⁹ “They teach you Hmong

⁵⁶ CCDSPT Medical Subcommittee Minutes, June 3, 1983, CCSDPT Minutes and Meetings, January 5 – July 7, 1983, Box 5, American Refugee Committee Records, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁵⁷ American Refugee Committee Report, Summaries of Refugees’ Situation in Thailand, Box 5, American Refugee Committee Records, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁵⁸ True Xiong, interview by the author, translated by Maile Vue, August 9, 2012, Minneapolis, Minnesota, digital recording at part 11.

⁵⁹ Neng Vang and Paj Ntaub Lis, interview by the author, March 25, 2012, Saint Paul, Minnesota, digital recording at 15:00-16:00. Names have been changed at the request of the interview narrators.

there—the Hmong language—and there were other opportunities for children at the church,” her daughter explained, “and that’s why she liked it.”⁶⁰

In visiting these churches, Hmong people were not necessarily thinking about religion. Kao Kalia Yang was a child when she was at Ban Vinai and remembered how missionaries offered sweets. “There were a lot of missionaries, so they were trying to recruit,” she said. “They gave candies.” Children had devised a strategy for getting some of these candies; missionaries, meanwhile, had devised their own strategy for creating opportunities for contact and conversation. “They never had enough candies for all of the children, but if you stood really quietly by your mom and the adults—you know, because actually, they give candy to the kid, but they want to talk to the adults,” Kao Kalia Yang said. “If you stood carefully by the adults, you got candy.” But even if she, as a child, longed for a lollipop, her family was lukewarm about the religious message that came with it. “The funny thing was we never felt like we didn’t have a belief system in place, so we weren’t looking,” she said. “[W]e were looking for a home, so when they came, we were more interested in the homes, potentially, on the other side of the ocean, than the actual religions.” Not only was her family primarily interested in securing passage to America, but they were not even sure what value Christianity had to offer them. “It wasn’t so fruitful for my family,” she said. “I don’t know how it worked for other families, ‘cause I know that a lot of them were recruited and they would ultimately find happiness within Christianity and Catholicism, and all these other faiths.” Her family, though, was not interested and was not recruited.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Ibid., digital recording at 27:00-28:00.

Like Kao Kalia Yang's family, many other Hmong people were looking for basic things—food, medicine, and security—and not necessarily religion. True Xiong believed that Hmong people visited the churches primarily out of material need, rather than religious interest. “During that time, I believe it was just people wanting to go and get free stuff,” she said. “Even though they were practicing the Hmong ritual, the practice—healing, and all that stuff—they still went and got medicines. They were just there to get medicines.” In fact, she believed that Hmong people saw the churches in the refugee camp as another source of aid, not as a religious institution. “They were just another program there to help,” she said.⁶² Cziasarh Neng Yang, who was at Ban Vinai as a teenage, held the same opinion. “I think people are looking for a way out—a way out, meaning, if we become Catholic, maybe we would get supported by the outside world for material good,” he said. In his memory, Christian missionaries “brought many valuable goods to distribute to the church members,” and he believed that Hmong people’s “economic wish” was “one way that people [were] attracted to the religion, to the practice, to the belief.”⁶³

Even if Hmong people did not adopt Christianity in the camps, the encounter with missionaries set the stage for future encounters with Christianity. That many churches and missionaries were involved with education and the distribution of aid meant that Hmong people might have begun to identify Christian churches as sources of material help—a mental association that may have shaped their relationship and response to Christianity not only in Thailand, but also later, in the United States. At the very least, the activity of missionaries in the

⁶¹ Kao Kalia Yang, interview by Paul Hillmer, January 18, 2008, Hmong Oral History Project, Concordia University, transcript, accessed January 18, 2014, http://homepages.csp.edu/hillmer/Interviews/Kao_Kalia_Yang.html.

⁶² True Xiong, interview, digital recording at part 12.

⁶³ Cziasarh Neng Yang, interview by the author, September 17, 2012, Saint Paul, Minnesota, digital recording at part 10.

refugee camps introduced Christianity to Hmong people who, back in Laos, had lived far from the mission stations. “We still believed and still practiced in the traditional Hmong way [upon arrival in the U.S.], but because the World Vision [was] coming to Laos, they had little service for the refugee, so we learned about that a little bit,” said Yong Kaye Moua. “And then when we crossed to Thailand, the World Vision also come to serve the refugee, so we learned a little bit about that. So we know that the church, many different church, extend their help to the refugee. We learned that.”⁶⁴ These early encounters in Laos and Thailand meant that when they arrived in the United States, many Hmong people saw Christians and churches as sources of assistance.

Attracted by material benefit or not, many Hmong people became Christian in the refugee camps, a religious change facilitated by the density of the Hmong population in the camps. According to Soua Lo, more people were converted in Thailand because so many people were gathered in one place, and there were always new people arriving at the camp. Hmong missionaries were very active and found great success. “One of my uncles,” she said, “he’d go out weekly to go to villages, to different towns, to talk about God, to talk about Jesus, so we would get new conversions.”⁶⁵ Her husband, Shong Yang, recalled how miraculous events caused mass conversions in Thailand, just as they had in Laos, but the impact there in Thailand was bigger, given the large population in the refugee camp. He recalled one such incident happening at a burial ground, a place that Hmong inhabitants of the camp believed to have been haunted by “bad spirits.” Adherents of indigenous Hmong religion believed that if they ventured into this territory, they would get sick and die, and they avoided it out of fear. “But when church

⁶⁴ Houa Vue Moua and Yong Kaye Moua, interview, digital recording at part 5.

⁶⁵ Soua Lo and Shong Yang, interview, digital recording at part 14.

in Thailand started to grow, the church people, they believed that God has great power,” he said. “And so one day, they decided they were going to go dig it up and flatten it out and make it into a place where people can actually walk on and be on. And so they went and dug it out and they cleaned out the place and nothing happened, and that’s when they truly believed that the power of God was on Christians to really help them be powerful and overcome that fear.” The public demonstration of God’s power impressed witnesses. As Shong Yang recounted, “when the non-Christians saw that, that’s when a lot of people started to be converted over to Christian because they knew that the power of God was much greater than the power [of] the spirits that were there.”⁶⁶

“Walking in the dark”

In the eyes of some Hmong refugees, adopting Christianity offered a solution to problems with “bad spirits,” but also a solution to their poverty, their homelessness, and their statelessness. Perhaps the greatest difficulty of living in the refugee camps in Thailand was living in limbo. More than anything, Hmong people struggled with uncertainty: their perils of returning to Laos, the prospects of reuniting with family members left behind, the probability of future resettlement in a third country, and the possibilities for their future lives should they resettle in the United States, France, Australia, or Canada. Yong Kaye Moua described the months of waiting, hoping for a sponsor, conferring with family members, and wondering about the future as “just like gambling.”⁶⁷ Nao Thao described that period as “walking in the dark” and “living in a dream.”⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Ibid., digital recording at part 15.

⁶⁷ Houa Vue Moua and Yong Kaye Moua, interview, digital recording at part 3.

“We did not know whether or not we will be able to go back or to go somewhere else,” recalled Cziasarh Neng Yang. “We had no information, and we had no plan. The number one thing is to be alive and to be healthy and just to live.”⁶⁹

Those Hmong refugees who accepted the reality that a return to Laos would endanger their lives did not necessarily embrace the opportunity to resettle in the United States because nobody knew what life in America would hold for them. Rumors circulated that cannibals, wife-thieves, and malevolent supernatural beings called *dab* and *nyab* terrorized newly arrived Hmong.⁷⁰ “If they hear one little rumor somewhere, then it’s like breaking news in [Thailand],” recalled Sarah Fang, who spent her childhood and teenage years in the refugee camps. “So that’s why some people don’t want to come [to the United States].”⁷¹ Relatives who resettled in the United States often sent letters and cassette tapes with recorded messages to family members back in Thailand to inform them about the realities of American life and to assuage their fears. However, the first Hmong refugees who left the refugee camps had little information about what was in store for them on the other side of the Pacific.

Uncertain about their future American lives, this first wave of Hmong refugees worried that adherence to their indigenous religion would not be possible in the United States. PaMang Her recalled that, in 1976, he warned other Hmong refugees that their traditional rituals would

⁶⁸ Nao Thao, interview, digital recording at part 6.

⁶⁹ Cziasarh Neng Yang, interview, digital recording at part 6.

⁷⁰ Kia Vue, interview by the author, translated by Maile Vue, September 8, 2012, Saint Paul, Minnesota, digital recording at part 5.

⁷¹ Sarah Fang and Nao Khue Yang, interview by the author, translated by Maile Vue, September 5, 2012, Saint Paul, Minnesota, digital recording at part 8.

not be sustainable. “At that time we told them to be believers [in Christianity] because there was no other way they could worship their spirits anymore,” he said.⁷² Cziasarh Neng Yang heard similar warnings, as did his brothers, who suggested that in lieu of practicing indigenous Hmong religion, adopting Christianity would be a useful alternative strategy for maintaining physical and spiritual well-being and preserving harmonious relations with the spirit world. “We do not know whether or not we will be able to conduct our traditional ritual,” he said. He and his brothers began to look for a “way out, ” and, as he recalled, “that was when my brother and my brother-in-law were, you know, encouraging us...to associate with the Catholic Church.”⁷³ Thirty-five years later, as he looked back on that period of his life, he emphasized that “during that time, our life was not stable”—a context that caused him to choose to be baptized in a church that he later left once he realized that practicing indigenous Hmong religion in the United States was, in fact, both legal and possible.

Some Hmong refugees at Ban Vinai hoped to be sponsored to go to the United States and intended to preserve their indigenous religious traditions in America; however, they knew that most of the resettlement agencies were affiliated with Christian churches and worried that practicing Hmong traditions would compromise their chances of being accepted for resettlement. A 1986 report by the Minnesota Governor’s State Advisory Council for Refugees examined the conditions of health care in the refugee camps and discovered that Hmong refugees avoided being sighted inside a traditional medicine center for fear that resettlement workers would see them there. “A very large traditional medicine center operates in Panat Nikom and it houses the traditional healers of all ethnic groups except the Hmong shaman,” the report found. “The

⁷² PaMang Her, interview transcript.

⁷³ Cziasarh Neng Yang, interview, digital recording at part 10.

Hmong in the camp will not visit the shaman when located in the TMC for fear of ridicule and the suspicion that they may not be able to go [to] the U.S. if they are seen visiting the shaman.”⁷⁴ Although no available evidence substantiates the claim that voluntary agencies prioritized Hmong refugees who identified as Christian, the possibility that Christian Hmong refugees might receive greater assistance or gain earlier admission to the United States was enough to persuade some Hmong refugees to abstain from practicing traditional rituals in public and, in some cases, to become Christian.

What is “Hmong religion”?

Given the lack of information about life beyond Thailand and the prominence of Christian agencies in resettlement administration, it is understandable that Hmong refugees were concerned that practicing traditional rituals might be grounds for the United States to deny an application for resettlement. Officials with the Joint Voluntary Agencies (JVA), which processed refugee cases and handled the interview process, explicitly asked Hmong refugees to identify their religion on the biographical forms that Hmong refugees were required to complete when they applied for resettlement. That JVA officials directly asked Hmong refugees to account for and identify their religion was curious and complicated, for several reasons.

For one, questions about religious identification on official government forms are rare. Since the United States Bureau of the Census began surveying the American population in 1790, it has never included a question about religion on its decennial census. Census officials did make

⁷⁴ Report by Minnesota Governor’s State Advisory Council for Refugees 1986, quoted in Thao and Conquergood, *I Am a Shaman*, 75.

attempts to gather information about the religious makeup of the nation. For example, in the 1880s, it began to conduct Censuses of Religious Bodies, which were surveys conducted on non-census years and directed to church officials rather than the general public, and in the 1950s, census officials revived public debate about including a religion question on the 1960 census. However, the Bureau of the Census, permitted by law to ask voluntary questions about religious identification for most of American history, never chose to do so. The reluctance was due, in part, to practical concerns that asking such a highly personal question would reduce census participation rates. More fundamentally, the Bureau of the Census believed that asking a religious identification question would run afoul of the First Amendment. In the middle of the twentieth century, with the Holocaust fresh in their memory, Jewish Americans campaigned aggressively against the inclusion of a religious identification question on the census and advanced a new principle of “religious privacy.” This idea gained significant traction during this period, to the point that in 1976, the same year that Hmong refugees first gained entry into the United States under the Lao Parole Program, Congress passed a law prohibiting the Census Bureau from including any mandatory questions about “religious beliefs or to membership in a religious body” on its surveys.⁷⁵

Refugee resettlement interviews, however, were an exception to the commitment to “religious privacy.” That resettlement officials asked a religious identification question of all Hmong refugees who were applying for resettlement underscores the degree to which refugee resettlement was not simply a government undertaking, but a public-private effort that itself

⁷⁵ Anne Farris Rosen, “A Brief History of Religion and the U.S. Census,” in *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey* (Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008). For an overview of the emergence of the principle of “religious privacy” in the post-war period, see Schultz, *Tri-Faith America*, 159–178.

blurred the boundaries of church and state. If Census officials and Congress worried that Americans would find a question about religious identification to be intrusive and in conflict with the First Amendment, refugee resettlement officials did not hold the same concerns for refugees, whose lives were subject to government intervention and social engineering in numerous ways.⁷⁶

In addition to being highly personal and potentially uncomfortable, a question about religious identification was also a difficult question to answer, especially for Hmong people. As Nao Thao explained, indigenous Hmong religion was something that she and her ancestors simply did; it was the “way” of the Hmong people, not necessarily understood as a distinct aspect of their lives labeled “religion.” The foreignness of this category is evident in the complications of translating the word “religion” and equating the Hmong people’s practice-centered, indigenous spiritual traditions with a Christian conception of religion that is centered on belief and faith. One Hmong translation for the word “religion” is *kev ntseeg*, a compound of the word *kev*, which means “way” or “path,” and the word *ntseeg*, which means “belief”; together, *kev ntseeg*, the term preferred by many Hmong Christians, is understood to refer to “faith.” Another translation for “religion” is *dab qhuas*, which is, variously, a generic term for religion, a description of ancestral and lineage-specific household spirits, and a catch-all word that some Hmong people have used to describe all elements of their indigenous traditions—ancestral worship, spirit worship, shamanism—together. *Dab qhuas* unites the word *dab*, which translates as “ghost,” “spirit,” or “demon”; and *qhuas*, which means “to praise”; put together, *dab qhuas* suggests an emphasis on worship and ritual practice rather than belief and is a term

⁷⁶ For a discussion of refugee resettlement as government intervention in refugees’ lives, see Ong, *Buddha Is Hiding*; Norman Zucker and Naomi Zucker, *The Guarded Gate: The Reality of American Refugee Policy* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987).

frequently used by those who practice indigenous Hmong religion.⁷⁷ Thus, the two translations for the word “religion”—*kev ntseeg* and *dab qhuas*—are commonly understood to mean, respectively, “faith” and “praise and worship of spirits,” terms that might seem very similar in the eyes of many Christian Americans, but not to Hmong refugees asked to identify their religion on government forms. It is not clear whether resettlement officials used the term *kev ntseeg* or *dab qhuas* when they interviewed Hmong refugees applying for resettlement, but the choice may have mattered. Hmong people might say that they believe in God, for example, but “follow the traditional way.” Nao Thao, for her part, said that she believes in her “ancestors,” but she identifies her religion—in her mind, the ritual practices that she does—as *ua neeb ua yaig*, or “shamanism,” a term that was not even available as an option on government-created resettlement application forms.⁷⁸

That “shamanism” was not listed as a religion on these forms reveals one of the greatest difficulties involved with asking Hmong refugees to identify their religion and, more broadly, one of the biggest challenges that Hmong refugees faced in bringing their traditions with them to the United States: Hmong beliefs and practices did not easily fit the categories of religion familiar to most Americans. Non-Christian Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Lao refugees who were applying for resettlement at the same time as the Hmong were able to identify themselves as adherents of a recognizable world religion—Buddhism. In contrast, indigenous Hmong religion was a tradition more expansive than the forms that officials filled out during the resettlement interview.

⁷⁷ In translating these Hmong terms, I relied on Yuepheng Xiong, *English-Hmong/Hmong-English Dictionary* (Saint Paul: Hmongland Publishing, 2006).

⁷⁸ Nao Thao, interview, digital recording at part 20.

On this point, an analysis of the case files of over 3,000 Hmong refugees resettled in Minnesota by the International Institute, the local affiliate of the American Council for Nationalities Service, is instructive. Each case file contained a copy of the biographical form that resettlement officials completed for each family applying for resettlement. During the resettlement interviews, resettlement officials asked Hmong refugees to identify their religion and noted their responses on the biographical forms, on which they marked a single checkbox. Although resettlement officials only selected one checkbox for each applicant—nobody marked more than one—indigenous Hmong religion could actually fall under more than one category; “animism,” “ancestral worship,” even “Buddhism” are all terms that Hmong people have used to describe themselves. For most of the resettlement period, however, officials identified Hmong refugees’ religious identities by selecting only one box. For a brief period, around 1979, the interview forms changed, so that refugees were allowed to describe their religion more freely, without having to conform to these categories. During that brief period, one is able to see just how complicated the question was of asking Hmong refugees to identify their religion. Many chose to use categories such as “ancestor worship” or “Buddhist,” qualifying these responses with noting “animist” in parentheses. Others answered the question without using any of those labels offered to them and instead chose to identify their religion by using the simplest—and most accurate—terms: “Hmong religion.”

In these circumstances, how did Hmong refugees respond to the religious identification question? Figures Two and Three offer a breakdown of the religious identification of a few thousand Hmong refugees resettled by the International Institute between 1976 and 1996. A few features are worth noting. First, the vast majority of Hmong refugees did not identify as Christian, though some people involved with refugee sponsorship believed that they were

resettling persecuted Christians. Kathleen Vellenga, chairperson of the church sponsorship project that brought the first Hmong family to Minnesota in 1976, informed her congregation that “because most Hmong are Christian they are objects for retaliation by the Communists and for this reason many had to flee.”⁷⁹ In fact, of the 3,277 Hmong refugees for whom biographical data is available, the great majority—78%—identified their religion as “Hmong folk religion,” “Ancestral Worship,” or “Animism,” while only 16% identified as “Catholic,” “Protestant,” or “Christian.”⁸⁰

Though the question of religious identification was a question that was both difficult to answer and deeply personal, almost every single one of the individuals answered the religious identification question during the resettlement interview. The particular context of resettlement interview may have had something to do with this high response rate. In general, Hmong refugees saw the resettlement interview as a high-stakes event and worried that incorrect answers would imperil a future in the United States. Hmong men recalled, for instance, that the inability to correctly identify a weapon used in combat could call their claims to military service into question and compromise their priority status in resettlement.⁸¹ Admission of a medical problem could send an individual to quarantine and hold up a family in Thailand for weeks or months, and any tiny discrepancy between forms—about ages and birthdates, for example—could cast doubt over an applicant’s honesty and the legitimacy of his or her claim to refugee status.

⁷⁹ Dayton Parish News of Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church, September 1976, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁸⁰ Box 21-24, 51-52, Case Files, International Institute of Minnesota Records, IHRC3257, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

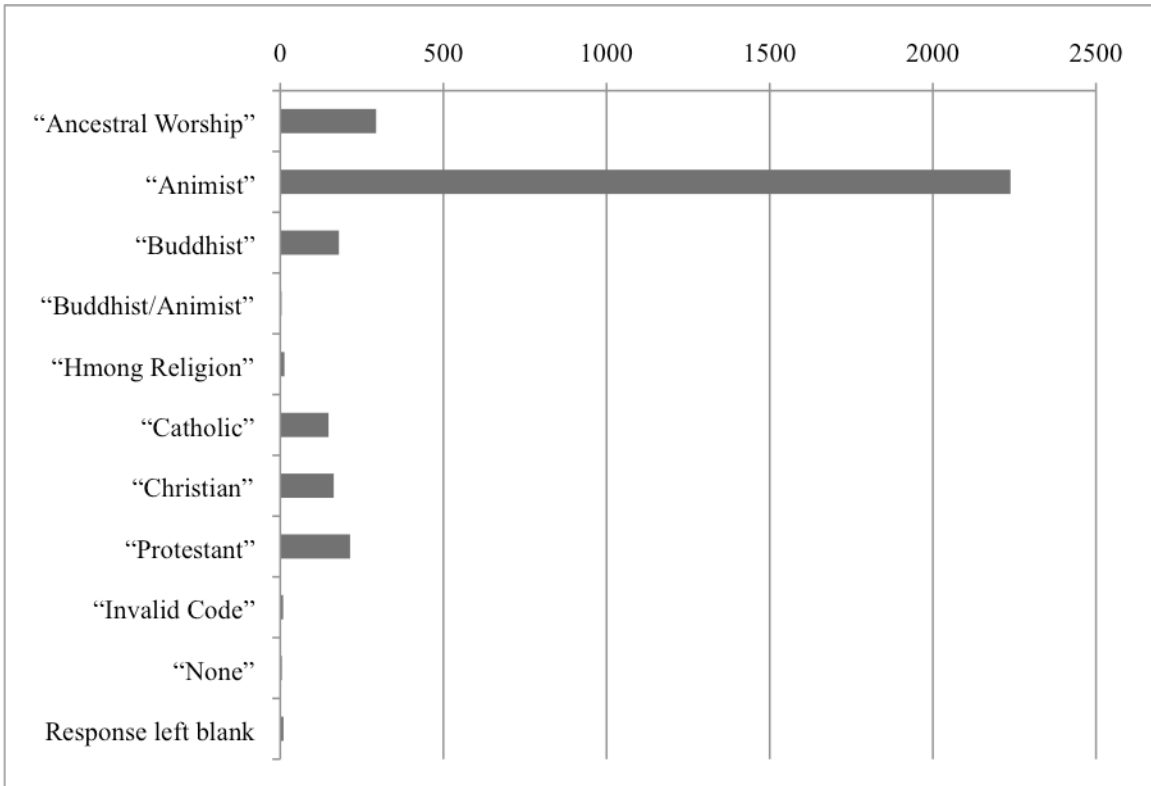
⁸¹ Soua Lo and Shong Yang, interview, digital recording at part 6.

Figure Two: Religious Identification of Hmong Refugees Resettled
in Minnesota by ACNS/International Institute, 1976-1995

RELIGIOUS IDENTIFICATION	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL
“Ancestral Worship”	294	8.97%
“Animist”	2238	68.28%
“Buddhist”	180	5.49%
“Buddhist/Animist”	2	0.06%
“Hmong Religion”	13	0.40%
“Catholic”	148	4.52%
“Christian”	164	5.00%
“Protestant”	214	6.53%
“Invalid Code”	9	0.27%
“None”	5	0.15%
Response left blank	10	0.31%
Total	3277	--

Source: International Institute of Minnesota Records, Case Files,
Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

Figure Three: Religious Identification of Hmong Refugees Resettled in Minnesota by ACNS/International Institute, 1976-1995



Source: International Institute of Minnesota Records, Case Files, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

In the end, how Hmong refugees responded to the religious identification question may not have had any impact at all on their resettlement prospects. It is not clear how voluntary agency or government officials used any of this information or if there was an advantage to identifying as Christian, as some Hmong refugees believed. But the experience of being asked to identify their religion to resettlement authorities—and to present their indigenous beliefs and practices as “religion”—was new to Hmong people who, throughout their years of living in secluded mountain villages, had not been forced to organize their lives according to these categories. How Hmong refugees defined their religion as they were applying for resettlement was but a precursor to what they would later experience once they were living in the United States, a pluralistic setting where employing the label of “religion” would help to ensure respect and accommodation.

Hmong religious change and Hmong refugee resettlement are two intersecting, interconnected migration stories. But while American resettlement policies accelerated the religious changes that transformed Hmong America, in truth, the religious trajectory of Hmong people and the Christian sponsors’ response to them were both profoundly shaped by pre-migration encounters in Asia. Hmong religious migrations began well before Hmong people boarded an airplane for America, as missionary projects in Asia bore significant influence on how Hmong refugees and Christian resettlement sponsors understood and approached one another on the other side of the Pacific.

Chapter Two:

Refugee Resettlement as Public-Private, Church-State Governance

The story of the resettlement of Hmong refugees in Saint Paul begins with a helicopter. In April 1975, television screens across the United States lit up with arresting images of American aircraft as they evacuated thousands of Vietnamese people fearing for their lives, frantic to flee Saigon. Crowding onto helicopters were the lucky ones, who clutched the hands of crying children and the pillowcases containing the few possessions they were permitted carry. Left behind were throngs of refugees, thousands of them, many more than the helicopters could ferry to safety, and no less desperate and afraid. This scene of chaos—of crowds of people crushing one another to capture a seat on a helicopter—dramatically depicted the consequences of war and the magnitude of human misery suffered in its aftermath.

In the quiet of her hospital room in Saint Paul, Minnesota, a young mother watched these events unfold. Kathleen Vellenga, a minister's daughter from Nebraska, typically spent her days occupied with the joyful work of raising three small children. In the spring of 1975, however, she underwent back surgery, and for a month afterward, she recuperated in bed. Finding her time in the hospital to be dreary and monotonous, she had grown restless, bored, and dissatisfied—until Saigon fell. "I'm watching the TV in my room, and here these people, you know, scrambling under the helicopters," she recalled. "I'm thinking, 'I have people coming in changing my sheets, giving me a drink of water, medicine, whatever I wanted. You know, I got totally out of my self-pity party and just said, 'When I get well, we're going to find a way that someone can stay here.'" Less than a year later, in the early hours of February 17, 1976, she braved the snowy Saint Paul streets to drive to the airport, where she and fellow members of Dayton Avenue

Presbyterian Church welcomed the Vang family, the first Hmong refugees to resettle in the Twin Cities.¹

A quarter of a century after Kathleen Vellenga and her congregation greeted the Vang family on that cold winter morning, the Twin Cities had become one of the epicenters of Hmong life in the United States. In this chapter, I explore the beginnings of this community and the ground operations of resettlement in Saint Paul and Minneapolis, in order to understand the organization and implementation of refugee assistance and the practical responses to fundamental questions about church, state, and religious difference.

I argue that, locally as well as nationally, refugee resettlement was a public-private enterprise, one that involved concerted effort by government and voluntary agencies, as well as contributions from congregations, which performed significant and diverse resettlement functions, including serving as “sponsors” for refugees, as Kathleen Vellenga’s church did. At the local level, the First Amendment tensions inherent in the administrative arrangements of resettlement were most salient, in large part because overburdened voluntary agencies often delegated responsibilities to congregations, which were unequivocally religious institutions. Reliance on congregations undercut the expectation that resettlement would be pursued as a non-religious activity. Voluntary agencies guided congregations in negotiating the blurry boundary between church and state and attempted to manage how church volunteers pursued their refugee work as religious work, but doing so proved challenging. As this study of Hmong refugee resettlement illustrates, the goal of providing resettlement services in a pluralistic and religiously neutral manner was difficult to reconcile with other objectives and realities. Capitalizing on the enthusiastic volunteer efforts of congregations allowed government and voluntary agencies to

¹ Kathleen Vellenga, interview by the author, September 14, 2011, Saint Paul, Minnesota, digital recording at 9:50-10:45.

expand the scope of their resettlement services, especially when public resources were scarce. At the same time, delegating work to congregations, especially with little oversight, compromised efforts by voluntary agencies to honor a commitment to neutrality and pluralism.

“Beyond the ability of our government to solve”

The arrival of Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees in 1975 was the beginning of an extensive, expensive, and institutionally complex Southeast Asian refugee resettlement effort that spanned decades. The Indochinese Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975 outlined the first plan to assist Southeast Asian refugees. In these initial efforts, the federal government gravely underestimated the availability of funds, as well as the needs and numbers of refugees still to come. In the years that followed, Congress approved the arrival of more refugees, including the Hmong, in a series of stopgap measures. By 1978, the stream of Southeast Asian refugees soon became a tide, as a second group of Vietnamese, Cambodian, lowland Lao, and Hmong refugees began to make their way to the United States. President Carter raised the quota of incoming refugees to 14,000 persons per month in 1979, but there remained the challenge of bringing these refugees to a level of self-sufficiency in the United States. To meet these needs, Congress also passed the Refugee Act of 1980, which sought to fix the inefficiencies in the resettlement program outlined in the Act of 1975. This act capped annual refugee entries at 50,000, created admission procedures that facilitated the efficient resettlement of refugees, and provided funding for refugee resettlement programs.²

² J. Bruce Nichols, *The Uneasy Alliance: Religion, Refugee Work, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 112–116. For a discussion of Southeast Asian

Despite widespread public support for refugees, proponents of refugee resettlement recognized the fragility of this welcome. Americans were already struggling to cope with an economic downturn, and officials worried that refugee resettlement could further strain local resources and provoke tensions at the local level. Achieving refugees' self-sufficiency as quickly as possible constituted the first priority of the federal government. Refugee resettlement programs during this period endeavored to prepare refugees for full participation in the American labor market. The heavy emphasis on self-reliance—and the outsourcing of work to private institutions to achieve that goal—converged with broader political and cultural shifts toward privatization and individualism in the late twentieth century, especially under the Reagan era. Hmong refugees arrived in the United States amid the intense public backlash against public spending and the welfare state, and as Aihwa Ong argued, “Southeast Asian refugees were guinea pigs in an experimental overhaul of welfare, one front in the war on the underclass.”³

Reflecting both the amplified valorization of self-reliance and the established public-private system of resettlement, the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975 and the Refugee Act of 1980 relied heavily on voluntary agencies for the day-to-day implementation of resettlement policy. Cooperation between the American government and private agencies, including religious organizations, was by no means a new phenomenon in either American domestic or foreign policy. As far back as the Continental Congress, the government had communicated with Indian nations through Protestant missionaries. In the nineteenth century,

refugee admissions policies, see Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*; Gil Loescher and John Scanlan, *Calculated Kindness: Refugees and America's Half-Open Door, 1945 to the Present* (New York: The Free Press, 1986). For a discussion of Southeast Asian refugee resettlement policy, see Zucker and Zucker, *The Guarded Gate*; North, Lewin, and Wagner, *Kaleidoscope*. For a discussion of refugee experiences under these programs, see Ong, *Buddha Is Hiding*; Steven Gold, *Refugee Communities: A Comparative Field Study* (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1992).

³ Ong, *Buddha Is Hiding*, 86, 87, 89.

social services involved a mixed economy of governmental and voluntary programs. Though the expansion of governmental social welfare programs in the 1930s coincided with some reduction in the involvement of voluntary agencies, the remainder of the twentieth century witnessed a reversal of these trends, as voluntary agencies fulfilled an increasing number of public functions into the 1980s.⁴

Public-private governance was particularly important American refugee resettlement policy. The onset of large-scale, international humanitarian crises after both World Wars overwhelmed the federal government, which lacked the essential manpower and organizational structure on the ground, and precipitated a heavy reliance on private agencies, including religious organizations. Both religious organizations and the American government during World War I believed that the involvement of churches and religiously affiliated organizations in refugee resettlement would be temporary, but the Second World War, the Korean War, and the Indochinese War only expanded this dependence.⁵ Indeed, both the federal government and the voluntary agencies assumed from the beginning that the voluntary agencies would, once again, undertake the bulk of the work of resettling Southeast Asian. In 1981, David North, Lawrence

⁴ Ralph Kramer, *Voluntary Agencies in the Welfare State* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981), 57–58.

⁵ Nichols, *The Uneasy Alliance*, 23–36. For a discussion of religious agencies and congregations involved in refugee aid and resettlement, see Ives, Sinha, and Cnaan, “Who Is Welcoming the Stranger?”; Porter, “Defining Public Responsibility in a Global Age”; Nawyn, “Making a Place to Call Home”; Stephanie Nawyn, “Faith, Ethnicity, and Culture in Refugee Resettlement,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 49, no. 11 (July 1, 2006): 1509–1527; Nawyn, “Faithfully Providing Refuge”; Scott Flipse, “To Save ‘Free Vietnam’ And Lose Our Souls: The Missionary Impulse, Voluntary Agencies, and Protestant Dissent against the War, 1965-1971,” in *The Foreign Missionary Enterprise at Home: Explorations in North American Cultural History*, ed. Grant Wacker and Daniel Bays (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 206–222; Scott Flipse, “The Latest Casualty of War: Catholic Relief Services, Humanitarianism, and the War in Vietnam, 1967-1968,” *Peace & Change* 27, no. 2 (2002): 245–270.

Lewin, and Jennifer Wagner prepared a report about the resettlement activities of voluntary agencies for the Bureau of Refugee Programs at the Department of State identified the following assumptions guiding the rationale to delegate resettlement responsibilities to voluntary agencies, commonly known as “volags”:

- (1) The volags are there and likely to stay, providing capacities and continuity lacking in public agencies.
- (2) They are more flexible in size and in function than units of government.
- (3) They bring private resources to bear, as governmental agencies cannot.
- (4) They attract, and keep, dedicated staff people.
- (5) They avoid a potential bias towards welfare, which might be found in the human resources agencies.
- (6) They are knowledgeable about, and sensitive to, ethnic differences and the special problems of refugees.⁶

For these reasons, borrowing capacity through voluntary agencies appealed to government officials, especially with a refugee resettlement project as ambitious as Southeast Asian refugee resettlement. Simply put, relocating and resettling several thousand refugees traumatized by war were problems that were “beyond the ability of our government to solve,” said William Guttieri, executive director of Catholic Charities in Stockton, California.⁷

The voluntary agencies involved with the resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees varied in mission and operational structure, with several critical similarities worth noting. Although some non-religious agencies participated in refugee resettlement, Christian organizations—the United States Catholic Conference (USCC), the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS), World Relief, World Vision, and Church World Service—resettled the majority of

⁶ North, Lewin, and Wagner, *Kaleidoscope*, 21–22.

⁷ “More Church Involvement Urged in Refugee Programs,” *Stockton Record*, October 17, 1980.

Southeast Asian refugees.⁸ As Figures Four and Five illustrate, in 1981, church-affiliated voluntary agencies resettled nearly three-quarters of Southeast Asian refugees. Nationwide, about forty percent of resettled refugees found help through the USCCB alone, which was the largest of the nine agencies to contract with the federal government to resettle Southeast Asian refugees. Twenty percent were assisted by Church World Service, a Protestant Christian agency associated with the National Council of Churches, and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, or Lutheran Social Services, helped fifteen percent. Two Christian voluntary agencies involved with Southeast Asian refugee relief and resettlement—World Relief and World Vision—were relatively new organizations that represented evangelical denominations and reflected the growing vitality of conservative religious movements.

These agencies received funds from the State Department to provide a range services. Overseas, they helped refugees apply for resettlement and arranged for travel; in the United States, they received a per capita government grant, which ranged from \$300 to \$500, to provide housing, groceries, dishes, beds, pillows, blankets, warm clothing, and pocket money for new arrivals. In addition, they enrolled children in schools and adults in language and job training; assisted refugees in locating employment; and identified sponsors, often families or churches, that could assume these responsibilities after the forty-five days, the initial period of resettlement and the window of time for which voluntary agencies were responsible for refugees in third countries. These agencies and their partner churches also received grants from the newly formed Office of Refugee Resettlement, under the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, to

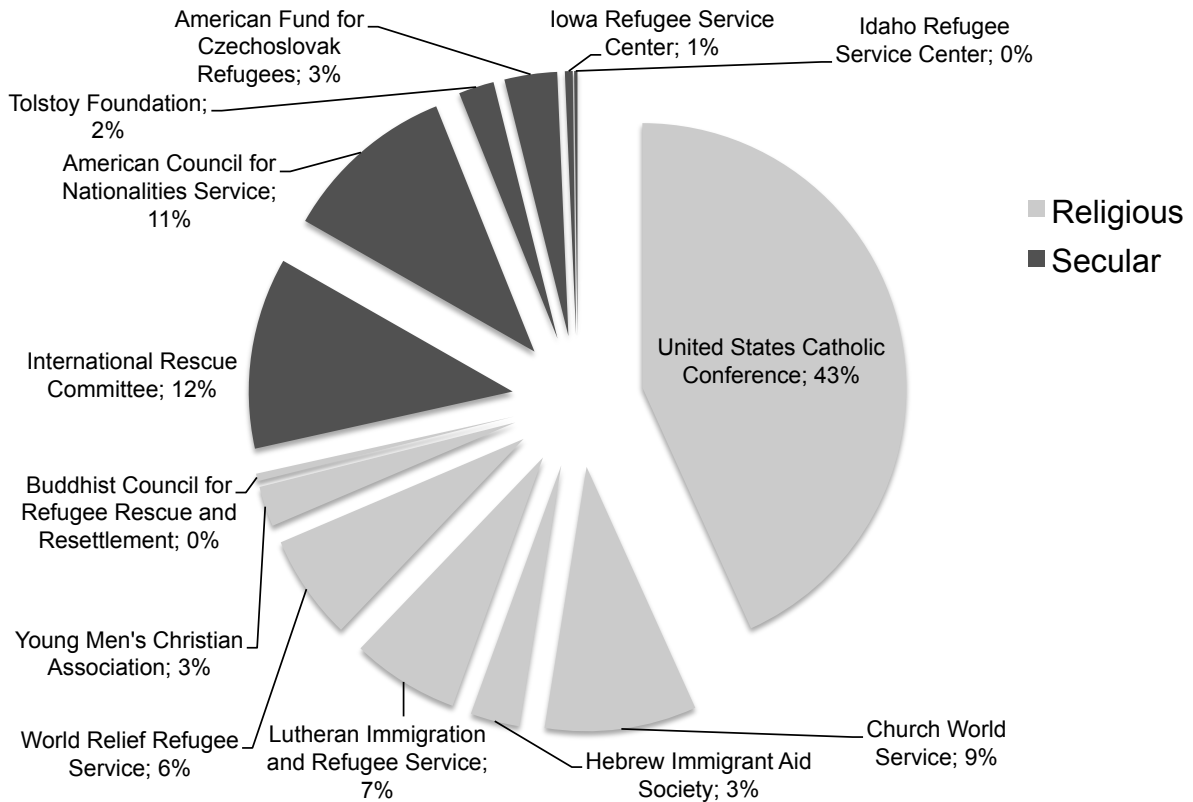
⁸ For a complete listing of the voluntary agencies that oversaw Hmong resettlement, see CCSDPT, *The Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT) Handbook: Refugee Services in Thailand* (Bangkok: Craftsmen Press, 1982); CCSDPT, *Report on Refugee Relief and Assistance in Thailand* (Bangkok: CCSDPT, 1981).

Figure Four: Distribution of Indochinese Refugee Resettlement Cases, FY 1981

VOLUNTARY AGENCY	CASELOAD	PERCENTAGE
United States Catholic Conference	56710	43.2
International Rescue Committee	15344	11.7
American Council for Nationalities Service	14020	10.7
Church World Service	12193	9.3
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service	8650	6.6
World Relief Refugee Service	8451	6.4
American Fund for Czechoslovak Refugees	4228	3.2
Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society	3958	3
Young Men's Christian Association	3241	2.5
Tolstoy Foundation	2850	2.2
Buddhist Council for Refugee Rescue and Resettlement	598	0.5
Iowa Refugee Service Center	626	0.5
Idaho Refugee Service Center	264	0.2

Source: U.S. Department of State, reprinted in *Kaleidoscope*, a report by David North, Lawrence Lewin, and Jennifer Wagner for the Bureau of Refugee Programs, 1982.

Figure Five: Distribution of Indochinese Refugee Resettlement Cases, FY 1981



Source: U.S. Department of State, reprinted in *Kaleidoscope*, a report by David North, Lawrence Lewin, and Jennifer Wagner for the Bureau of Refugee Programs, 1982.

provide long-term programs to ease the transition: cash assistance, English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, job training, and mental health programs.⁹

These voluntary agencies, with their role in refugee resettlement formalized by law and supported by millions of dollars in federal funds, constituted much more than sponsors; these agencies were, in certain ways, an extension of the state. As Naomi and Norman Zucker argued, voluntary agencies were “integral to the formulation and execution of refugee policy in general.”¹⁰ The federal government, intent on ensuring the most efficient use of public funds, treated voluntary agencies like other government agencies and attempted to monitor their local operations. Beyond financial matters, though, local operations generally enjoyed a large degree of autonomy, due in part to the lack of government oversight, but also to the federated organizational structures of the voluntary agencies themselves.¹¹ The administrative arrangements of resettlement, characterized by a complex bureaucracy and a dizzying chain of delegated responsibilities, presented opportunities for individuals involved in local operations to pursue their own objectives, which did not always overlap with the objectives and interests of other participants in the resettlement system.¹² Refugee resettlement, as it played out on the ground, often took its own course.

⁹ North, Lewin, and Wagner, *Kaleidoscope*, 3–17.

¹⁰ Zucker and Zucker, *The Guarded Gate*, 122.

¹¹ North, Lewin, and Wagner, *Kaleidoscope*, 26–38.

¹² That religious agencies pursued objectives different from those of the government was especially apparent abroad, where voluntary agencies involved in refugee relief and humanitarian efforts often opposed American foreign policy, particular in regard to the Vietnam War. See, for example, Flipse, “To Save ‘Free Vietnam’ And Lose Our Souls.”

“The best way to do this was to try to do a cooperative effort”

As was the case in the refugee camps in Thailand and in the federal resettlement planning efforts in Washington, D.C., refugee assistance in Minnesota was a monumental task that compelled resettlement planners to marshal all of the resources at their disposal. Local refugee assistance, as a result, was an effort undertaken jointly by state, county, and city governments and by the local affiliates of the national voluntary agencies. Religious organizations in particular offered significant and valuable contributions from the onset, when the first Southeast Asian refugees arrived in Minnesota in the spring of 1975.

The public-private approach to resettlement in Minnesota was formalized with the establishment of the Indochinese Resettlement Task Force within the governor’s office in 1975. Appointed by Governor Wendell Anderson, the Indochinese Resettlement Task Force consisted of representatives from the Governor’s Manpower Office and the Departments of Welfare, Employment Services, and Education, in addition to the voluntary agencies, the ethnic mutual assistance associations, and private industry. In creating the task force, Governor Anderson desired to promote “common planning, information sharing, and problem solving among the involved parties,” particularly in facilitating “the provision of follow-up services to resolve longer-term problems and to aid in the assimilation and accommodation of the Indochinese people.”¹³ Tom Kosel, a former Catholic priest who later worked with Catholic Charities in Saint Paul, recalled how this spirit of cooperation “goes way back to 1975, when everything first

¹³ Governor’s Refugee Resettlement Office, 1976-1977, Minnesota Dept. of Public Welfare, Refugee Program Office Records, Minnesota Historical Society, State Archives.

happened.” “Somehow or other,” he said, “all the voluntary agencies got together at the beginning and determined that the best way to do this was to try to do a cooperative effort.”¹⁴

In 1977, oversight of resettlement activities transferred to the Department of Public Welfare, but Minnesota’s comprehensive system of refugee services remained a joint, collaborative endeavor. The Refugee Program Office coordinated activities between the Department of Public Welfare and other Minnesota State agencies; county Human and Social Services Departments; the several dozen agencies with which the Refugee Program Office held purchase-of-service contracts for education, employment, and health programs; the local affiliates of the voluntary agencies, including Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services, International Institute, Church World Service, and, later, World Relief; refugee mutual assistance associations; and other private foundations.¹⁵ The 1979 official Minnesota “State Plan for Refugees,” which each state was required to produce in order to receive funding from the Department of Health and Human Services, delineated the specific responsibilities for each agency involved in refugee resettlement:

To accomplish effective resettlement, the public and private agencies have cooperated closely. The private agencies’ unique domain is to secure sponsors and bring the refugees to this country. Because federal funding for resettlement has gone through the public welfare system and because the welfare system is that which is equipped to deal with the range of services required, the state agency is responsible for the coordination and provision of services after the refugees

¹⁴ Tom Kosel, interview by the author, June 23, 2011, Saint Paul, Minnesota, digital recording at 42:15-43:05.

¹⁵ Bruce Downing, *Hmong Resettlement Study Site Report: Minneapolis-St. Paul* (Minneapolis: Southeast Asian Studies Project, Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, University of Minnesota, 1984), 6.

arrive. Together, the state and voluntary agencies form a consortium to provide services and to respond to the ever changing parameters of the refugee program.¹⁶

Representatives from the voluntary agencies, described by the crafters of the state plan as “the backbone of the resettlement program in Minnesota,” convened monthly with the state refugee coordinator to share information and resources, to promote an orderly and responsive resettlement process, and to maximize the efficiency of their efforts. The voluntary agencies were indispensable to successful refugee assistance efforts not simply because they provided greater resources and manpower, but because they offered valuable experience and knowledge. “From the beginning, their efforts to secure and prepare sponsors, work with staffs in resettlement programs, and provide a wide range of follow-up services to individuals and families in the state have resulted in extensive understanding and expertise in the resettlement program,” the writers of the state plan noted. As a result, “both private and public agencies are active in the planning and provision of services.”¹⁷

Not only did voluntary agencies “bring refugees to this country” and take responsibility for core reception and placement services, but they also organized a statewide refugee consortium to coordinate and administer programs attending to the long-term needs of refugees. Beginning in 1976, voluntary agencies received funding from the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to provide employment training, language instruction, and other essential assistance that benefited refugees long after the initial phase of resettlement. The three major voluntary agencies determined that it was more efficient to coordinate their efforts and to assign

¹⁶ State Plan for Refugees 1979, Governor’s Refugee Resettlement Office, 1976-1977, Minnesota Dept. of Public Welfare, Refugee Program Office Records, Minnesota Historical Society, State Archives.

¹⁷ Ibid.

each agency one area of follow-up services in which to specialize: the International Institute offered English language instruction, Catholic Charities provided employment counseling and job training, and Lutheran Social Service focused on health and social adjustment services.¹⁸ Such a plan streamlined the refugee assistance system and also improved both the quality of their services. “In those first five years, from ’75 to ’80...the resettlement agencies, the staff of the resettlement agencies were pretty much doing everything, and it got to the point that they were spread so thin in their efforts that they couldn’t do a decent job with anything because they were expected to do everything,” Kosel said. “And so that’s the strength of the Minnesota system of refugee resettlement, is that it was realized that you have to, in a sense, specialize...we were told that the object was to work together, and that’s what we followed.”¹⁹ Kosel led a highly regarded employment program called Refugees in Search of Employment, known popularly as Project RISE, a project started by Catholic Charities in 1981. “It was a good program, it was set up well, and it operated well for many years,” he said, noting that the successful program earned national recognition and praise from President Reagan. The channels through which the program received money to operate reveal the complex structure of the refugee resettlement apparatus. “It was supported by funds through the state refugee office,” he explained. “It was funds that came from the national office of health and human services, through the state refugee office, to Catholic Charities.”²⁰

In both initial reception and placement services and long-term programs to assist refugees in attaining self-sufficiency, local congregations, as communities of enthusiastic volunteers,

¹⁸ Downing, *Hmong Resettlement Study Site Report: Minneapolis-St. Paul*, 7.

¹⁹ Tom Kosel, interview, digital recording at 47:57-49:10.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, digital recording at 1:20:30-1:20:45.

offered essential, and often overlooked, support. Voluntary agencies, in an effort to expand their capacity and to widen the scope of their services, delegated critical responsibilities to congregations, which were engaged to serve as “sponsors” that housed, clothed, fed, and assisted refugees throughout the first few weeks after arrival. Congregations, which functioned as extensions of the voluntary agencies, were thus integral to the resettlement of refugees from Southeast Asia in Minnesota, where congregational sponsorship was the primary means of resettling refugees in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Congregational sponsorship was the predominant model for Southeast Asian refugee resettlement during this period for several reasons. First, reflecting the general pattern nationwide, the most active voluntary agencies in Minnesota were religious agencies. By 1976, only five voluntary agencies were involved in resettling the 4,300 Southeast Asian refugees: Catholic Charities, the local affiliate of the United States Catholic Conference; Lutheran Social Services, the local affiliate of the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service; the International Institute, the local affiliate of the American Council for Nationalities Services; Church World Service, the humanitarian organization of the National Council of Churches; and the Christian and Missionary Alliance, an evangelical Protestant denomination.²¹ Two years later, World Relief, a resettlement agency associated with the National Association of Evangelicals, began to resettle refugees in Minnesota. All of these agencies, with the exception of the International Institute, were associated with Christian denominations. In general, other voluntary agencies that were active elsewhere in the United States—the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society, the Tolstoi

²¹ Governor’s Refugee Resettlement Office, 1976-1977, Minnesota Dept. of Public Welfare, Refugee Program Office Records, Minnesota Historical Society, State Archives.

Foundation, and the International Rescue Committee—maintained only a small presence in Minnesota.

These voluntary agencies, like other organizations involved in refugee resettlement and relief, struggled to meet the needs of the thousands of refugees arriving from Southeast Asia. While experienced and established, they lacked the manpower and material resources to provide all of the support services necessary for refugees to attain self-sufficiency. “The resettlement staff could not be responsible for every single bit of work to be done,” said Kosel. “There was just too much to be done, and you needed to start specializing.”²² The creation of Minnesota’s consortium system grew out of the recognition that the most efficient delivery of services was possible through a coordinated system in which each agency specialized in a particular area of need, such as healthcare, language learning, and employment.

Religious voluntary agencies, however, had access to a valuable and readily available resource: congregations. Just as the State Department formed cooperative agreements with voluntary agencies for the administration of reception and placement services, the voluntary agencies delegated essential tasks to local congregations through the “moral commitment” of sponsorship. The terms of sponsorship agreements changed over time and varied across agencies, but most resembled this agreement from Church World Service:

[Name of Congregation or Sponsoring Unit] hereby agree to assist a refugee family with their resettlement in the United States. In agreeing to assist the family, the congregation assures Church World Service that it will help them become self-supporting in the shortest possible time after their arrival in the community and will assist them in the following ways:

1. Meet the family at the airport upon arrival.
2. Arrange for temporary housing.
3. Assist with food, clothing, housewares, basic furniture, etc.

²² Tom Kosel, interview, digital recording at 1:26:36-1:26:45.

4. Assist in finding employment for the breadwinner.
5. Help the refugee and his family become oriented in the community.
6. Assist in enrolling in English classes.²³

Congregational sponsorship was not a resettlement model unique to Minnesota; the national voluntary agencies considered congregational support a fundamental component of their system of resettlement. “The labors of love, the common sense and the dedication of thousands of Lutherans is the most important single resource of the resettlement program,” declared officials at the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service in 1976. “The congregation (or individual sponsor), as it continues its resettlement ministry in cooperation with DIRS, will be the primary working unit in the resettlement process.” According to the Lutheran plan, the national offices and local affiliates existed primarily to “support congregations, sponsors and refugees,” by coordinating services, providing information, and procuring new sponsors.²⁴ The Protestant voluntary agencies—Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, World Relief, and Church World Service—were most likely to rely on the congregational sponsorship model of resettlement, but the United States Catholic Conference used this approach, too.²⁵ “The key ingredient in the Catholic network is the local parishes,” said Mark Franken, a former executive director of the Migration and Refugee Services of the United States Conference of Catholic

²³ Church World Service Agreement Sponsor Form, Pamphlets Relating to Refugee Relief and Assistance in Minnesota and the United States, Minnesota Historical Society Pamphlet Collection, Minnesota Historical Society.

²⁴ Standing Committee, Protocol, Minutes, August 9, 1976, Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., Department of Immigration and Refugee Service, Record Group 10/1, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Archive.

²⁵ North, Lewin, and Wagner, *Kaleidoscope*, 33.

Bishops, one of the major voluntary agencies involved with resettling refugees.²⁶ Later, in the 1980s, when Southeast Asian resettlement efforts shifted focus to family reunification, congregations remained involved in sponsorship, by serving as co-sponsors for local ethnic mutual assistance associations and for recently arrived families that lacked the financial resources to support relatives on their own.²⁷

Mark Franken had first-hand knowledge of the advantages of congregational sponsorship and the generous and quick response that this model of resettlement offered. In 1975, when he was a college student and Army veteran recently returned from the Vietnam War, Franken received a disquieting telephone call. It was a Red Cross volunteer, who informed Franken that his close friend, a Vietnamese man he had met during the war, was languishing at a refugee camp at Fort Indiantown Gap. Mark, loyal to his friend and eager to help, set to work on finding a home for the man and his large family. But by November, with winter looming and no leads on an apartment, the situation seemed hopeless. “Everybody’s getting desperate, including myself,” he recalled. “So I started asking around, ‘How can I get some help for these people?’” He heard about the resettlement efforts of the local Catholic Charities and called the office immediately. “I told them what I’ve been through, what I’m trying to do for this family of thirteen,” he explained. “They said, ‘We’ll call you back.’ And I thought, huh.” He was not optimistic. “The next day—after three months of everyday trying to find a house—the next day

²⁶ Mark Franken, interview by the author, October 19, 2006, Washington, D.C., transcript, p. 5.

²⁷ Pamphlets Relating to Refugee Relief and Assistance in Minnesota and the United States, Minnesota Historical Society Pamphlet Collection, Minnesota Historical Society; North.

Catholic Charities called back, and they said, ‘St. Michael’s is willing to take this family. They’ll have a place ready for them in a week.’ And they did.”²⁸

As Franken’s experience demonstrated, congregational sponsorship held many advantages over individual sponsorship. The national leadership of the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service observed that congregational sponsorships were less likely to break down. In addition, congregations assisted individual refugee families for a longer period of time and were a renewable resource in the ongoing work of resettlement. “Whereas the support of individual sponsors (with notable exceptions) seems to be diminishing, the support of Lutheran congregations in most parts of the country seems to be persistently strong,” one 1976 report noted. In the same report, a regional consultant from Kansas and Oklahoma praised “the enduring capacity of our congregational sponsors,” who are “sticking with it, continuing to minister to new kinds of needs.”²⁹

Congregational sponsorship involved contributions from dozens, even hundreds, of individuals. “The program takes a tremendous amount of time, but like any project, the burden isn’t really heavy when people are willing to help,” said Judy Scheider, resettlement coordinator for Guardian Angels Catholic parish. Congregations were able to tap the time and energy of hundreds of church members. At Guardian Angels, sixty-five families were involved in resettlement. At St. Rita’s Catholic parish, about a hundred families actively participated in the sponsorship project, and a joint sponsorship project at Immaculate Heart of Mary and St.

²⁸ Mark Franken, interview, transcript, p. 4.

²⁹ Standing Committee, Protocol, Minutes, March 29-30, 1976, Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., Dept. of Immigration and Refugee Service, Record Group 10/1, Evangelical Church in America Archive.

Joseph's benefited from the assistance of 290 people.³⁰ Like Immaculate Heart of Mary and St. Joseph Catholic parish, many other congregations pursued collaborative, and often ecumenical, sponsorship projects. Catholic and Lutheran churches, historically antagonistic, worked together to sponsor refugee families in Chokio and Alberta, Minnesota, for example.³¹

Government officials had an interest in supporting this resettlement model because it decreased the likelihood that refugees would turn to public assistance. In contrast to individual sponsorship, church sponsorship allowed a large community of enthusiastic volunteers to pool their resources, making congregations unparalleled sources of material help. "There's so much opportunity there for the material needs of the refugee to be met properly," explained Tom Kosel. "You get all kinds of donated furniture and household items that way...and even financial contribution. Because when people come here, by and large, they have nothing, and this is a good way of getting things that they need."³² Sponsorship by such a large group of people meant that refugees received material help that far exceeded the \$250 that Catholic Charities gave congregations to sponsor each individual.³³ Fong Her, who was resettled in Saint Paul, recalled the generosity of the church that assisted his family:

When we got to Saint Paul, it was May the 9th, 1980. It was still cold that year. We don't have any coats, they passed us coats for that spring. A church sponsored us -- it's a church it's not a family -- that meant they had more funds to receive us at that time. We had a house ready to move in when we got here. We had food in

³⁰ Jeanne Luxem, "Gospel Verse Puts Parishes into Action," *Catholic Bulletin*, September 7, 1979.

³¹ Pat Westberg, "State Catholic 'Network' Expected to Settle 850 Viets," *Catholic Bulletin*, August 1, 1975.

³² Tom Kosel, interview, digital recording at 11:56-12:42.

³³ Jeanne Luxem, "Gospel Verse Puts Parishes into Action."

the refrigerator. We had a lot of food. We never experienced that and then also, we had people -- brother-in-law, aunt and uncle they were already here -- so when we got to Saint Paul it was a lot easier for us kids and for the adults also because a lot of people that we knew were already here. It was a church that sponsored us, not a family that meant we had everything ready when we got here.³⁴

Refugees also benefited from the services and contacts that congregations offered. For example, the sponsorship committee at Immaculate Heart of Mary and St. Joseph's had so many contacts that they were able to secure jobs for their sponsored refugees almost immediately.³⁵ According to Ingrid Walter, director of the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, the involvement of so many different people allowed congregations to uniquely attend to the diverse needs of refugees:

It is our conviction that a congregation offers a diversity of resources that equip it well to assist the refugee [to] build a new life in this country and to help him become self-sufficient. Some members of the congregation will be best at meeting the immediate physical needs, providing temporary housing or assisting him find employment. Others in the congregation will be best able to provide personal guidance in the many complicated facets of everyday life in the United States. Others will be best at providing the close emotional and spiritual support that will help the refugee become part of the community and give him a sense of being 'at home' in a new land, while at the same time showing understanding for the refugee's culture.³⁶

When a large, diverse community undertakes a sponsorship project, Walter explained, "individuals within a congregation can become involved in the Christian ministry of resettlement

³⁴ Fong Her, interview by Peter Chou Vang, Hmong Oral History Project, Concordia University, transcript, accessed January 18, 2014, http://homepages.csp.edu/hillmer/Interviews/Fong_Her.html.

³⁵ Jeanne Luxem, "Gospel Verse Puts Parishes into Action."

³⁶ Standing Committee, Protocol, Minutes, January 24-25, 1978, Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., Dept. of Immigration and Refugee Service, Record Group 10/1, Evangelical Church in America Archive.

in varied, yet personal ways.”³⁷ Mark Franken described the advantages of congregational sponsorship in similar terms. “[I]n a parish, you’ve got resources that you can tap,” he said. “You’ve got employers in the parish, you’ve got people who can provide transportation, you have doctors in the parish. In other words, you’ve got the ability to not only welcome a newly arriving refugee...you got the ability to take care of the refugees’ initial transitional needs, whether it’s jobs, or housing, equipping the house, getting the kids in school, these kinds, navigating the social security system, all those kinds of things.”³⁸

By connecting refugee families with the rich social networks of churches, congregational sponsorship increased the odds that refugees would find employment. The authors of the Hmong Resettlement Study praised the “informal but highly successful system” of congregation-based employment efforts, in which sponsors “were able to assist directly through their own knowledge of where jobs might be found.” When the number of refugees increased and when large numbers of Hmong arrived from other states in the early 1980s, unemployed Hmong turned to preexisting and less beneficial sources of employment help, such as the State Job Service, CETA, and WIN, programs that assumed that job-seekers were literate, fluent in English, and familiar with tasks such as creating a resume, perusing classified advertisements, and participating in interviews.³⁹ Eventually, Catholic Charities established Project RISE, an employment program serving all refugees, regardless of which voluntary agency sponsored them. Lutheran Social Services and

³⁷ Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, “Face to Face: The Ministry of Refugee Resettlement – An Orientation Brochure for Congregations,” Pamphlets Relating to Refugee Relief and Assistance in Minnesota and the United States, Minnesota Historical Society Pamphlet Collection, Minnesota Historical Society.

³⁸ Mark Franken, interview, transcript, p. 5.

³⁹ Downing, *Hmong Resettlement Study Site Report: Minneapolis-St. Paul*, 26.

Church World Service, while sending many of its clients to Project RISE, nevertheless continued to rely heavily on their own sponsoring congregations to find employment for refugees. “Some sponsoring churches are able to mobilize committees of volunteers to go door knocking in search of job openings,” observed the researchers of the Hmong Resettlement Report. “It is thought by the organizers that this type of volunteerism has great potential for producing jobs at low cost.”⁴⁰

Church sponsorship afforded such generous assistance that those refugees who were not sponsored by congregations sometimes complained among one another and to their sponsoring voluntary agencies. Communication between a disgruntled Hmong refugee and a frustrated caseworker at the International Institute reveals that both refugees and voluntary agencies knew that church sponsorship offered the best access to material resources. “Your request for financial help to purchase a TV set, washing machine and tape recorder is a matter of concern to us,” the caseworker wrote. “We can best illustrate this problem by bringing up an example. When you are born to poor parents, who cannot buy all the expensive toys you see other children have, do you tell your parents that you have to have these toys? In a way we resemble poor parents. We cannot give you as many things as a church-parish can when they sponsor a family... As sponsoring ‘parents’ we wish we could do more for you and your family.”⁴¹

Voluntary agencies recognized that congregations offered a valuable reserve of human and material resources to the point that non-religious agencies delegated sponsorship responsibilities to them. The International Institute, a secular voluntary agency, matched refugee families with several congregations throughout the Twin Cities. For example, the Vang family,

⁴⁰ Ibid., 28.

⁴¹ Box 51, Case Files, International Institute of Minnesota Records, IHRC3257, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

the first Hmong family to be resettled in Minnesota, was resettled by the International Institute and sponsored by three Saint Paul congregations: Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church, House of Hope Church, and Macalester-Plymouth Church. According to the Hmong refugee case files, the International Institute placed refugee families with at least a dozen congregations throughout Minnesota.

Congregational sponsorship was the primary mode of resettling refugees from Southeast Asia in the 1970s and early 1980s and the most significant way in which churches contributed to the resettlement effort. However, some local religious groups assisted resettlement through other arrangements. Religious organizations outside of congregations—monastic communities, women’s circles, and college campus fellowships, for example—agreed to serve as sponsors. For example, in Saint Paul, the Benedictine Sisters of Saint Paul’s Priory provided a refugee family with one year’s rent and assisted a sponsorship project at St. Odilia’s parish in Shorview; the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary provided temporary shelter for a mother and her seven children at Our Lady of Peace convent, Saint Paul.⁴² Even a local nursing home was eager to support resettlement efforts. Residents at the Oak Terrace Nursing Home wrote a letter to the Minnesota State Refugee Program Office with the proposal that one of its vacant buildings “be made available as a Christian Connection Center” that would serve as “a temporary resettlement center for the Indochinese refugees who are being sponsored by the members of the churches.”⁴³

That church volunteers would knock on doors to hunt for jobs or that elderly Minnesotans would open their nursing home to refugees indicate one undeniable virtue of congregational

⁴² “50 Viet Refugees On Way,” *Catholic Bulletin*, July 11, 1975

⁴³ Oak Terrace Resettlement Plan, Minnesota Dept. of Public Welfare, Refugee Program Office Records, Minnesota Historical Society, State Archives.

sponsorship and of faith-based resettlement efforts more generally: religious resettlement volunteers possessed unparalleled passion for refugee service, work they imbued with deep moral meaning. For example, when the chairman of the sponsorship committee at Minneapolis's Crystal Free Evangelical Church organized efforts to welcome a Hmong refugee family, he first prepared his fellow Christians for the responsibilities of resettlement by quoting a passage from Matthew: "For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited me in; naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you came to me" (Matthew 25: 35-36). In soliciting donations of time and money, the chairperson urged, "as God leads you, please give to this project."⁴⁴ For the members of Crystal Evangelical Free Church and many other congregations, refugee resettlement was a ministry to which God had led them, and common acts of refugee care—whether it was accompanying refugees on visits to the doctor, organizing English tutoring sessions, or gathering silverware and linens to stock a new home—constituted a religious practice that expressed volunteers' deepest Christian commitments.⁴⁵

Given the centrality of the congregations to the resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees, government and voluntary agencies undertook elaborate measures to enlist churches to serve as sponsors. On this front, Hmong resettlement enjoyed several advantages compared to other resettlement projects. For one, the Lao Parole Program, under which the Hmong arrived, followed closely behind the intense and successful effort to resettle Cambodian and Vietnamese

⁴⁴ Box 51, Case Files, International Institute of Minnesota Records, IHRC3257, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

⁴⁵ Refugee resettlement volunteers demonstrated what Nancy Ammerman has described as "Golden Rule Christianity." See Ammerman, "Golden Rule Christianity: Lived Religion in the American Mainstream."

refugees a year earlier. By the time the Hmong were added to Southeast Asian refugee resettlement efforts in 1976, most voluntary agencies had already developed elaborate national sponsorship recruitment plans.⁴⁶ Over time, as refugees continued to arrive in the United States, these voluntary agencies began to approach sponsorship procurement as an ongoing project. The Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, for example, developed a “sponsor bank” from which it could draw in response to the continuing need for help in resettlement.⁴⁷ As more and more refugees arrived, the national office, in an effort to recruit more congregations for sponsorship commitments, eventually began to ask local affiliates to send them projections of the “potential availability of ministering congregations.”⁴⁸ A 1981 report prepared for the Bureau of Refugee Programs in the Department of State found that “much of the field state of the Protestant volags are not engaged directly in refugee service (the principle function of other volags’ field staff) but in sponsor-recruitment.”⁴⁹

These sponsorship recruitment efforts benefited from the cooperation and support of their denominations. The national offices of the denominations produced media kits to raise awareness of refugee issues. For example, the *Catholic Bulletin*, the leading Catholic newspaper for the Twin Cities, reported that “[s]lide shows, radio spots, newspaper ads, flyers, pictures, and

⁴⁶ Standing Committee, Protocol, Minutes, March 29-30, 1976, Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., Dept. of Immigration and Refugee Service, Record Group 10/1, Evangelical Church in America Archive.

⁴⁷ Standing Committee, Protocol, Minutes, February 24-25, 1977, Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., Dept. of Immigration and Refugee Service, Record Group 10/1, Evangelical Church in America Archive.

⁴⁸ Standing Committee, Protocol, Minutes, September 6-7, 1977, Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., Dept. of Immigration and Refugee Service, Record Group 10/1, Evangelical Church in America Archive.

⁴⁹ North, Lewin, and Wagner, *Kaleidoscope*, 88.

even ideas are being distributed by the United States Catholic Conference to diocesan resettlement directors to assist them in promoting the refugee sponsorship program.” The media included application forms for parish sponsorship and publicity photographs “depicting a wholesome-looking Vietnamese family, and a group of pensive young Vietnamese men consulting with a USCC representative.” The effort aimed to recruit congregational sponsors and also “to create a more receptive atmosphere in the community toward the refugees.”⁵⁰ The national office of the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services also undertook “an intensive sponsorship procurement campaign,” which involved outreach to all levels of the Lutheran leadership: “Letters providing information on the expanded [Lao] parole program were sent to district and synodical presidents of the three church bodies, Lutheran social service agency executives, the Council Executive committee, the Division of Mission and Ministry and Department of Immigration and Refugee Services standing committees, and LIRS regional consultants.” In addition, all Lutheran congregations received a sponsorship appeal package and a filmstrip about the conditions of refugee camps in Thailand.⁵¹

Voluntary agencies and local religious leaders coordinated sponsorship procurement efforts. “It started out very, very heavily by going to the parishes and saying, can you help to resettle refugee families,” Tom Kosel said, “and in ’75 there was such an immediate response to that that a great majority of the parishes throughout the Archdiocese were helping to resettle refugees, not just within the Twin Cities, but in the outlying communities as well.”⁵² Lutheran

⁵⁰ “Refugee Aid Promoted,” *Catholic Bulletin*, July 4, 1975.

⁵¹ Standing Committee, Protocol, Minutes, January 28-29, 1976, Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., Dept. of Immigration and Refugee Service, Record Group 10/1, Evangelical Church in America Archive.

⁵² Tom Kosel, interview, digital recording at 1:38:20-1:39:00.

congregations, upon the encouragement of their denomination, included sponsorship literature in their church bulletins and organized refugee-themed activities during “Social Ministry Month.” Congregations set aside certain Sundays as refugee awareness days, on which slide shows and films about the plight of refugees would follow morning worship services.⁵³ When a congregation agreed to sponsor a refugee family, the decision was publicized in the local religious press. The *Catholic Bulletin* and the *Lutheran Standard* regularly printed the names of sponsoring congregations and published stories featuring church volunteers and the rewarding experience of resettlement. Marguerite Loftus, resettlement director of Catholic Charities, also appeared with a successfully sponsored refugee on the local television show, “Church Beat,” to raise awareness of sponsorship.⁵⁴

Government officials recognized the importance of mobilizing religious communities and supported sponsorship procurement efforts, often appealing to patriotic themes. In 1979, Minnesota Governor Albert Quie and his wife, Gretchen, produced a pair of public service announcements for television to assist the voluntary agencies in their recruitment. “For the refugees from Indochina, home just doesn’t exist anymore,” explained Governor Quie in one commercial. Images of children in war-torn Asia flashed across the screen as Mrs. Quie continued, “a sponsor will provide food, clothing, and shelter to families displaced by war and oppression, and your concern will help them feel it’s good to be at home in Minnesota.” As in other sponsorship recruitment materials, the Quies’ commercial emphasized that Southeast Asian

⁵³ Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., Dept. of Immigration and Refugee Service, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services Assorted Publications, Evangelical Church in America Archive.

⁵⁴ “Church Beat on Refugees,” *Catholic Bulletin*, November 7, 1975.

refugees were America's anti-communist allies and that it was America's duty to welcome freedom-loving victims of communism.

Their sponsorship appeals also emphasized the United States' immigrant roots. "Back in the 1890s, this family came to Minnesota from Serbia," said Governor Quie in a second commercial, which featured nineteenth-century photographs of bundled-up immigrants disembarking from a boat. "Like most of our families, they are of immigrant stock. My wife, Gretchen, and I hope that you will help us welcome a new group of immigrants to Minnesota: the refugees from Indochina." Mrs. Quie added with a smile, "this country has a history of hospitality toward people displaced by war and oppression, and it could be your warm welcome that makes people feel at home in Minnesota."⁵⁵

These recruitment efforts proved successful, and a large number and a wide range of congregations in the Twin Cities volunteered to serve as sponsors. A survey of *Catholic Bulletins* between 1975 and 1982 indicates that 45 Catholic parishes throughout the Twin Cities and in southern Minnesota sponsored Southeast Asian refugee families, while reports in the *Lutheran Standard* during the same period suggest that at least seven Lutheran congregations assisted resettlement efforts, either through sponsorship or the provision of services such as English instruction. There were also several dozen Protestant congregations, some associated with mainline Protestant denominations and others operating as evangelical non-denominational churches, that sponsored refugees, as did a couple Jewish communities. Often, recruitment was unnecessary; congregations approached the volunteers. The records of the International Institute of Minnesota contain letters from several individuals who, like Kathleen Vellenga, had been moved

⁵⁵ Alberg Quie, *Sponsor a Refugee*, video tape, 1978, Minnesota Governor Audio-Visual Materials, 1978-1983, Minnesota Historical Society.

by images of Southeast Asian refugees on the evening news and were eager to help in any way that they could.

“[I]t is the church not the government that provides sponsorship for them now”

How, precisely, did the churches endeavor to help refugees “feel it’s good to be at home in Minnesota”? The first church sponsorship of a Hmong refugee family was joint effort by Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church, Macalester-Plymouth Church, and House of Hope Church, and a narrative of their sponsorship experience illustrates the ways in which congregations practiced sponsorship.⁵⁶

The project began with Kathleen Vellenga, a member of Dayton Avenue Church. She, like the other organizers of the resettlement project in this congregation, considered herself a political progressive committed to social change and humanitarianism; sponsorship was an extension of her life-long commitment to political activism, which, in the 1980s, led her to several terms in the Minnesota State Legislature. Her politics reflected those of other members of Dayton Avenue Church, an activist congregation in the urban core of Saint Paul. As a self-described ‘Rainbow Church,’ the church strived to serve a racially integrated congregation with a

⁵⁶ Calvin Didier, the pastor of House of Hope Presbyterian Church, was, at one point, a member of the Indiana House of Representatives and the national president of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State and actively lobbied Minnesota legislators to oppose school prayer. He argued, “The intermingling of the two becomes the most formidable oppressor of peoples’ freedoms that the world has ever known. The state is trying to do one thing in regard to power. The church ought to be on an entirely different mission, speaking in purely spiritual terms. When you get those two combined then you have the power of ideology and the conviction of it, armed with the might of the state and it becomes an intolerable oppressor. There is nothing that can stand against it.” See Elaine Ellis, “Rev. Didier Speaks Out on Politics and Prayer in Schools,” House of Hope Records, Ramsey County Historical Society.

diverse staff. Well before their involvement in Hmong refugee resettlement, Dayton Avenue Church had already undertaken the project of running Liberty Plaza, a housing project for low-income families.⁵⁷ The orientation toward diversity and social activism was why Kathleen Vellenga and her husband joined the church in the first place. “Our children would not be going to church with all white kids,” she said. “We wanted our kids to have a cross-cultural experience.” Even more, “we wanted to make the world a better place for all these kids,” and a large portion of the congregants was “parishioners who wanted to do good.”⁵⁸ Designated a “mission church” by its denomination, Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church received support from its denomination to pursue innovative urban missions projects. Beginning in 1957, the church received \$6,000 for “area outreach ministry,” and by 1973, the congregation’s missionary enterprises had grown so much that the church was receiving up to \$40,000.⁵⁹

Kathleen Vellenga believed that a refugee sponsorship project expressed the social justice mission of the congregation, and as soon as she was able, she began to build support for the sponsorship project. She recalls the first meetings with members of her congregation. “When I went to my church, they said, ‘We’re a little mission church. We can’t take on someone from some other country! You’re crazy.’ Others said, ‘Yeah, but how are you going to do it?’ And I said, ‘Well, we’ll get another church. So I went to Mac-Plymouth, and they said, sure, we’ll provide people, too. So that was very, very key because we got some wonderful people and

⁵⁷ “You Have to Work to Appreciate People,” Dayton Parish News of Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁵⁸ Kathleen Vellenga, interview, digital recording at 6:30-7:20.

⁵⁹ Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church, “You Have to Work to Appreciate People.”

some key resources.”⁶⁰ In December 1975, she reported to the congregation that Presbyterian denominational officials had granted permission for Dayton Avenue Church to form a cooperative agreement with Macalester-Plymouth Church for a sponsorship project.⁶¹ While negotiating these arrangements, she also solicited congregation members to raise funds for the “DMP Sponsorship Fund,” submitted a request for financial aid from the Presbytery, and made arrangements for the prospective refugee family to be housed in Liberty Plaza.⁶² Other sponsorship committee volunteers prepared the townhouse and gathered donations of furniture and clothing from the congregation. “THE CONTRIBUTIONS HAVE BEEN WONDERFUL!!!” Vellenga exclaimed in an update in the church bulletin.⁶³

The two churches expected that they would sponsor a Vietnamese family, but plans changed when Vellenga contacted the International Institute of Minnesota, the local affiliate of the American Council for Nationalities Service. Olga Zoltai, an International Institute caseworker, had just heard about the new Lao resettlement program, which started in 1976. “She was able to convince her boss that there was this new money funding bringing Southeast Asians over,” Vellenga recalls. “And so when I contacted the International Institute, I was given Olga, and she said, ‘Well, you know, we’re working on this.’”⁶⁴ Dayton Avenue Church learned in the

⁶⁰ Kathleen Vellenga, interview, digital recording at 19:15-19:40.

⁶¹ “QATKCA (Quick Attempt to Keep Congregation Abreast),” Dayton Parish News of Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church, December 1975, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁶² Ibid.; Dayton Parish News of Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church, February 1976, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁶³ “All May Be One,” Dayton Parish News of Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church, December 1975, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁶⁴ Kathleen Vellenga, interview, digital recording at 18:55-19:13.

fall of 1975 that they would be resettling the Vangs, a family of eleven from Laos. “The Vang family have been living in a refugee camp in Thailand since they had to flee Laos, and will be coming directly from there to us here in Saint Paul,” Vellenga informed the congregation in the church bulletin. “The family consists of 11 persons: the head of the house and his wife, their two babies; his mother; two adult brothers; and four school age brothers and sisters.”⁶⁵ Beyond this information, she knew little else; only when the Vang family arrived, in February 1976, did she first hear the word “Hmong.” The only thing she knew was that “they can’t stay where they belong, they have to leave,” but, she confessed later, “I knew nothing about Hmong; I knew nothing about the Secret War.”⁶⁶

Finally, the family arrived, although not as either the International Institute or Vellenga expected. “They did not stop in California, as later groups did,” Vellenga said. “They came straight from the camp, on the plane, to Minnesota. It’s ten below zero.” Because of this direct flight, which crossed the International Date Line, the sponsors were confused about the travel dates, and the Vang family arrived a day earlier than expected. “So did we not only didn’t know who they were, which was the most important thing—we didn’t even know when they were arriving!” Vellenga recalled. Somehow, one of the Vang family members managed to call Zoltai, who woke Vellenga up with an urgent telephone call at 6:30 in the morning. “They’re here already!” Vellenga recalled Zoltai saying. “So we grabbed all these coats.” A caravan of cars, filled with church volunteers and agency staff, crawled through the icy morning streets to the airport, where, in the middle of the deserted terminal, they found the Vang family. “They

⁶⁵ Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church, “All May Be One.”

⁶⁶ Kathleen Vellenga, interview, digital recording at 18:41-18:50.

were huddled together so tight, I thought that if they tried to move, the whole thing would fall apart,” Vellenga said. “...They just looked so frightened.”⁶⁷

The first few days were filled with a frenzy of activity as the church volunteers helped the Vang family settle into their new home. “We delivered them to the apartment,” Vellenga recalls. “They just looked so desolate. We tried to describe things and then said, well, we’ll leave you alone, you know, to get some sleep until tomorrow. And the next day we went back and showed them how to use the stove and things like that.”⁶⁸ The next few weeks saw the full force of congregational manpower and spirited love-thy-neighbor volunteerism. “We worked with people from both churches in finding jobs,” Vellenga said. Meanwhile, “we got the kids in school,” and Vellenga worked with a church member who had been an English teacher to “go over and tutor the women.”⁶⁹ Due to the abundance of volunteers and the absence of adult English classes during this period, “we were trying to teach English ourselves!” Vellenga recalled with a chuckle.⁷⁰ Other church volunteers made time to bring the Vang family on “rides, shopping trips, doctor visits,” and “a dietician from Mac-Plymouth Church not only provided a well-researched supply of groceries the Vangs needed for their basic stock, but...endured the monthly hassles with the food stamp office.”⁷¹ Finally, the congregations assisted the Vang family in filing the necessary paperwork for relatives to join them in the

⁶⁷ Ibid., digital recording at 21:30-22:50.

⁶⁸ Ibid., digital recording at 24:00-24:45.

⁶⁹ Ibid., digital recording at 26:00-27:37.

⁷⁰ Ibid., digital recording at 58:25-58:33.

⁷¹ Dayton Parish News of Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church, September 1976, Minnesota Historical Society.

United States. Four months later, another Vang brother arrived. “It was such a big deal, the reunification,” Vellenga said. “It was on the news that night—in part because we had a member of our church who was a newscaster.”⁷² Church bulletins from Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church reveal that the efforts paid off: after six months, Vellenga reported that the adult men had found stable jobs at the Minnesota State Data Processing Center and the Gold Medal Beverage Company. “Their adjustment to a totally different culture and climate has been amazing and we all marvel at their adaptability,” Vellenga wrote.⁷³

An accounting of the finances of the Dayton resettlement effort reveals the degree to which congregational sponsorship gave refugees access to unparalleled material help. According to the 1976 annual report, the sponsorship committee had raised the following funds:

Contributed by DAPC members (gifts by 12 families) - \$621.50
Contributed through DAPC by Presbytery - \$500.00
Rent contribution through debt principal reduction for Liberty Plaza by DAPC - \$1834.75
Contributed by House of Hope Presbyterian (\$500 to account for Tong) - \$1000.00
Contributed to date by Mac Plymouth - \$2785.00
Remaining in DMP sponsorship savings - \$1455.00
Remaining in Mac Plymouth sponsorship savings - \$525.00
Remaining in DMP checking - \$106.00⁷⁴

Time and again, Vellenga described refugee resettlement as a private voluntary effort with no government support. “Vangs are very appreciative of all the hands of friendship and the financial aid,” she reported to the congregation in March 1976. “They were surprised that all the

⁷² Kathleen Vellenga, interview, digital recording at 43:20-43:35.

⁷³ Dayton Parish News of Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church, September 1976, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁷⁴ “Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church 1976 Annual Report,” Dayton Parish News of Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church, Minnesota Historical Society.

money comes from people in the churches and none from the government.”⁷⁵ Later, she added, “It is difficult for them to understand that after all they risked and lost for the U.S.A. during the war that it is the church not the government that provides sponsorship for them now.”⁷⁶ In truth, the United States government did contribute to the resettlement of refugees. Each voluntary agency received a per capita grant of \$500 to defray the costs of resettlement. However, this sum paled in comparison to the amount of money that it actually cost to resettle refugees.⁷⁷ In addition, congregations did not necessarily receive this money from the voluntary agencies, which were free to disburse the funds to congregations, local affiliates, or individual refugees as it best saw fit.⁷⁸ To some degree, Vellenga was speaking the truth when she described her congregation’s sponsorship project as having been funded solely by church money; the International Institute may not have passed on any of the public money it received to Dayton Avenue Church or Macalester-Plymouth Church. Her description of sponsorship, however, obscures the fact that congregations, as extensions of voluntary agencies that contracted with the government, were built into the bureaucratic apparatus of refugee resettlement, an endeavor that united public and private institutions, as well as church and state.

Beyond sponsorship and the initial phase of resettlement, congregations also assisted voluntary agencies and governments in providing refugees with long-term services. In job

⁷⁵ Dayton Parish News of Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church, March 1976, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁷⁶ Dayton Parish News of Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church, September 1976, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁷⁷ Standing Committee, Protocol, Minutes, March 29-30, Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., Dept. of Immigration and Refugee Service, Record Group 10/1, Evangelical Church in America Archive.

⁷⁸ North, Lewin, and Wagner, *Kaleidoscope*, 72–74.

placement, English instruction, mental health services, and youth programming, congregations continued to help the voluntary agencies expand their capacity. “[W]e must no lose sight of the fact that resettlement does not [end] when a refugee leaves the camp,” noted Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service officials in 1976. “The work of the congregations in helping these individuals attain self-sufficiency—and our work in help in support of these congregations—is entering a new phase, that of providing follow-up services to congregations and resettled refugees.”⁷⁹ In the Twin Cities, this commitment to “follow-up services” took many forms. For example, because the refugee family they sponsored had difficulty with transportation, the “Matthew 25” sponsorship committee at St. Rita’s offered English classes in their parish for seventeen adults.⁸⁰ Christ Lutheran Church, in collaboration with the Southeast Asian Ministry and the Saint Paul Literacy Project, offered morning and evening English classes, along with childcare; their classes were filled to capacity. Lutheran congregations supported and staffed the Southeast Asian Ministry’s “Donation Room,” which contained clothing, household goods, and furniture to refugee families.⁸¹ A Dominican sister offered sewing classes for Hmong women seeking to develop job skills and to prepare themselves for the Minnesota winter, while

⁷⁹ Standing Committee, Protocol, Minutes, January 8-9, 1976, Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., Dept. of Immigration and Refugee Service, Record Group 10/1, Evangelical Church in America Archive.

⁸⁰ Jeanne Luxem, “Gospel Verse Puts Parishes into Action.”

⁸¹ Folder 29, Box 3, The Refugee Studies Center, University of Minnesota Records, General/Multiethnic Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

another Catholic Sister taught a job skills course and ran the Notre Dame English as a Second Language School in Saint Paul.⁸²

These efforts became even more valuable when secondary migration to Minnesota swelled the Twin Cities Hmong population and budgetary constraints brought cuts to refugee programs. “Teaching and tutoring by untrained volunteers, usually members of the congregation of sponsoring churches, has provided a supplement or an alternative to funded formal instructional programs from the beginning of Hmong resettlement,” noted the authors of the Hmong Resettlement Study. “During the heaviest influx of Hmong refugees, in 1980, these volunteers began to assume a more important role, when the funded programs were overwhelmed by the numbers of potential students and many arrivals were placed on waiting lists.”⁸³

“[Y]ou’re dealing with individuals here that you can’t always be on top of”

Delegating resettlement responsibilities to local congregations allowed voluntary agencies to expand their capacity and to serve a larger number of refugees, but not without a price. The reliance on congregations introduced significant complications to the delicate balance that voluntary agencies attempted to strike as religious charities receiving public funding. The heavy involvement of openly religious institutions undermined voluntary agencies’ goal of implementing a policy of religious neutrality and accommodation. Voluntary agencies needed to

⁸² “Regina Helps Hmong Brace for Winter’s Cold,” *Catholic Bulletin*, December 12, 1980; Kay O’Loughlin, “Nun Teaching Hmong Refugees How to Find Jobs,” *Catholic Bulletin*, July 22, 1982.

⁸³ Downing, *Hmong Resettlement Study Site Report: Minneapolis-St. Paul*, 57.

manage congregations carefully, especially since sponsoring churches were responsible for most of the day-to-day tasks of resettlement and had the closest contact with refugees. However, controlling congregations proved to be a difficult task for the voluntary agencies.

Throughout the 1970s, while the nation debated the proper relationship between church and state, the same questions troubled government and religious leaders at the local level. In the Twin Cities, government, churches, and voluntary agencies preferred to emphasize that church and state were capable of working together for the advancement of the common good. “We heard much—altogether too much—about the conflict between Church and State during the recent election campaign,” a *Catholic Bulletin* editorial read. “Ignored almost entirely during the often inflammatory debate was the historic record of Church-State cooperation that has been one of the great strengths of this nation.” The editorial pointed to the newly opened Kosciolk House, a joint project of archdiocesan Community Development Corporation and the Hennepin County Community Support Project and the product of \$410,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Kosciolk House, a residence for the mentally ill, was “at least one contemporary example of the way Church and State have traditionally worked together for the mutual benefit of society.”⁸⁴

Although the voluntary agencies argued that cooperation between church and state benefited society, they were aware of the recent Supreme Court decisions concerning the entanglement of government and religion and the new demands of operating in a multireligious setting. The professionalized staff of the voluntary agencies knew that they were expected to refrain from religious activities and to serve with religious neutrality. They began to minimize the open missionary dimensions of their work while also expressing a commitment to

⁸⁴ “Church, State Join Hands,” *Catholic Bulletin*, November 7, 1980.

accommodating the religious diversity of their refugee clientele. “Because you’re receiving public funds and other sources of funding outside of your own religious community...there are certainly restrictions and so on in terms of promoting your own religion or requiring people to participate in services of your own religion,” Tom Kosel explained. “Those kinds of restrictions have to be followed. At Catholic Charities, you come in for services; you don’t have to start the day praying or something. Some other agencies that provide services require their participants to be part of religious ceremonies or services. That’s not something done at Catholic Charities or Lutheran Social Service, to my knowledge. It could be an optional thing in some circumstances, but, by and large, the promoting of a particular religious belief isn’t done.”⁸⁵

These decisions reflected the instructions they received from national and denominational authorities. For example, according to the guidelines that the National Council of Churches gave to its affiliated social service agencies, which included the resettlement agency Church World Service, religious charities receiving public funds were required to ensure “religious liberty for all persons and groups.” “[E]stablishment of religion, insofar as it entails governmental support, promotion, preference or control of churches or religion, is damaging both to prophetic Christian faith and to religious liberty,” the National Council of Churches argued.⁸⁶

If the staff of the local offices of the voluntary agencies adhered to this policy, it was even more important that the congregations did so, too, because the volunteers of sponsoring churches had the closest relationships with refugees and the most direct encounter with religious difference. As it turned out, a policy of religious neutrality was difficult to enforce in

⁸⁵ Tom Kosel, interview, digital recording at 1:49:35-1:51:23.

⁸⁶ “Revised Report of the Special Committee on NCC Use of Government Resources,” June 1967, Church World Service Papers, Presbyterian Historical Society.

congregations, for several reasons. For one, the driving force behind congregational sponsorship was its corps of volunteers, who lacked the experience and professionalism that characterized the paid staff of the voluntary agencies. Accountability was also a challenge, as congregations were one step removed from direct government oversight. In some areas, the voluntary agencies did not have local offices to support and oversee congregations, and church sponsors had a tremendous amount of freedom. “When a volag [voluntary agency] is getting in contact with a particular congregation there, there is supposed to be some good orientation process,” said Tom Kosel, “and you go in to have meetings with the parish leadership, and you explain the ins and outs of proper resettlement. To my knowledge, that’s what’s done, but that doesn’t mean that there wouldn’t still be individuals in congregations that either don’t get that message or don’t follow that message very closely. So you’re dealing with individuals here that you can’t always be on top of [in] all situations.”⁸⁷

Complicating matters further, congregational sponsors desired to actively shape the lives of refugees, often according to what the sponsors believed was best. The paternalistic and familial language that resettlement volunteers used to describe sponsorship reveals their desire for close bonds with the refugees, but also the subordinate role that they expected the refugees to assume. Leaders and lay members of these congregations endeavored to welcome refugees into their congregational “family,” and resettlement coordinators referred to refugees as being “adopted.”⁸⁸ Kosel recalled how some sponsors treated Hmong refugees as if they were children. “[The Hmong] are physically much smaller than most of the other refugees,” he said. “That gave an attitude to people sometimes that they needed to be treated as children, just because they were

⁸⁷ Tom Kosel, interview, digital recording at 9:20-10:10.

⁸⁸ “Sponsors Sought to Help Refugees,” *Catholic Bulletin*, August 8, 1980.

physically small and they didn't know how to speak English.”⁸⁹ Similarly, Kathleen Vellenga criticized a “big brother” approach to sponsorship. “[I]f you're coming in there [saying], 'I'm going to be your big sister, big brother,' it's not going to work,” she cautioned. “Most little sisters and little brothers think their big brothers and sisters are too bossy.”⁹⁰ Nonetheless, congregations, as sources of valuable help, wielded tremendous influence on refugees, including in the area of religious belief and practice.

Perhaps most important, congregations were patently religious institutions, and their openly religious aspirations at times diverged from the deliberate efforts by the voluntary agencies to provide resettlement services in a religiously neutral manner. Indeed, religious commitment was one of the reasons that congregations were so effective as sponsors: because church volunteers assigned great moral meaning to the work of resettlement, they were committed and reliable sources of help. As Kathleen Vellenga's narrative of sponsorship reveals, congregations tended to see their work not as the delegated work of the state, but as a form of grassroots Christian service. Most church sponsorship committees made explicit reference to the religious values that animated their work. Seventy-five Catholic parishes called their sponsorship committees “Matthew 25” groups, after the New Testament verse, “Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers, that you do unto Me.”⁹¹ Voluntary agencies, especially in their sponsorship recruitment efforts, encouraged congregations to undertake resettlement as a religious enterprise.

⁸⁹ Tom Kosel, interview, digital recording at 1:01:10-1:01:36.

⁹⁰ Kathleen Vellenga, interview, digital recording at 1:02:10-1:02:37.

⁹¹ Jeanne Luxem, “Gospel Verse Puts Parishes into Action.”

“Respect the refugees’ culture and religion”

Thus, religious voluntary agencies, as middlemen between government and congregations, found themselves in a delicate situation: they needed to cultivate enthusiasm for religious service and also manage the religiousness of that service. In response to these competing pressures, voluntary agencies attempted to instruct congregations in the proper expression of religion and the appropriate responses to religious difference. Their guidance was, at best, ambiguous.

First, voluntary agencies declared almost uniformly that they expected congregations to respect the religious beliefs of the refugees. “Great care should be taken to refrain from showing disdain or disrespect for the refugees’ religious beliefs and convictions,” advised World Relief.⁹² “Be careful to respect their religion and their religious practices,” urged the Migration and Refugee Services of the United States Catholic Conference.⁹³ Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service acknowledged that “it is natural for you to want to share with the refugees what is important to you and what you believe is beneficial,” but urged that “respecting [refugees] as human beings means respecting their beliefs as well.”⁹⁴ The rationale for accommodating religious difference was that failure to do so undermined the overall resettlement project.

⁹² Folder 56, Box 3, The Refugee Studies Center, University of Minnesota Records, General/Multiethnic Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

⁹³ Migration and Refugee Services, United States Catholic Conference, *Sponsorship: Access to a New Life*, Correspondence by Name, 1979-1981, Box 2, American Refugee Committee Records, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁹⁴ Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, *Face to Face: The Ministry of Refugee Resettlement*, Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., Dept. of Immigration and Refugee Service, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services Assorted Publications, Evangelical Church in America Archive.

Because religion is “a fundamental part of one’s identity,” Church World Service cautioned against “rushed or pressured religious changes or ‘conversions’” which the organization considered to be “disastrous both psychologically and emotionally for refugees.” “Religious beliefs and traditions may be one of the elements of their heritage that refugees have not lost in their flight,” the manual explained. “Abruptly relinquishing these beliefs adds one more loss to their already overflowing burden of losses and grief and thus further complicates their adjustment, mental health and ultimate integration.”⁹⁵

At the same time, voluntary agencies acknowledged the Christian commitment to share the Gospel with the unchurched. “The willingness of the churches to reach out in sponsorship to refugees is based upon their religious beliefs and values,” the Church World Service resettlement manual read. “It is inevitable, therefore, that sooner or later various questions arise that are related to ‘sharing faith’ and the responses of the refugee in these matters. The desire to share out Christian heritage and faith is an important part of the church.”⁹⁶ But voluntary agencies endeavored to instruct the sponsoring churches in the proper ways of “sharing the faith” with refugees.

Trying to strike a balance between accommodating the religious beliefs of refugees and honoring the Christian duty to spread the Gospel, voluntary agencies used the resettlement manuals to guide church sponsors in distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate means

⁹⁵ “Church World Service, *Manual for Refugee Sponsorship*, Church World Service Records, Presbyterian Historical Society. In Canada, the Mennonite voluntary agency adopted a similar approach, although Mennonite congregational sponsors had different beliefs about how to share Christianity with church-sponsored Hmong refugees. Voluntary agency officials insisted on not taking advantage of refugees’ vulnerability, but sponsors objected to this approach, considering it “negative spiritually.” See Winland, “The Role of Religious Affiliation in Refugee Resettlement,” 102.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

of Christian witness. They encouraged congregations to invite refugees to worship services and other church events for the sake of facilitating bonds of friendship, which they considered essential for refugees' spiritual and emotional wellbeing. As the resettlement manual for World Relief put it, "sponsors should feel free to invite their refugees to go to church with them," as one of the basic tasks of resettlement was "inclusion in spiritual experiences through church and church-related activities."⁹⁷ Similarly, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services advised that refugees should be "welcome to participate in church activities and services."⁹⁸ According to the Lutheran manual, refugees benefited from congregations that warmly offered "the fellowship of loving persons who are willing to share themselves with others." Even if the family is not Christian, the manual stated, the refugee family "will appreciate being related to a family of persons who are concerned about them" and who "[o]ffer them the choice as to whether or not they want to come to church. Invitations to church activities may, in fact, be welcome. One refugee, for example, asked his sponsor if he could bring a friend with him to church. The sponsor assured him he could. 'Good!' the refugee said, explaining, 'He was not sponsored by Lutherans, and I did not know if it was all right.'"⁹⁹

At the same time, the voluntary agencies urged caution about extending invitations to participate in church activities and advised against being too aggressive. Word Relief declared,

⁹⁷ Folder 56, Box 3, The Refugee Studies Center, University of Minnesota Records, General/Multiethnic Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

⁹⁸ Standing Committee, Protocol, Minutes, January 8-9, 1976, Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., Dept. of Immigration and Refugee Service, Record Group 10/1, Evangelical Church in America Archive.

⁹⁹ Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, *Face to Face: The Ministry of Refugee Resettlement*, Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., Dept. of Immigration and Refugee Service, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services Assorted Publications, Evangelical Church in America Archive.

“refugees must not be coerced or placed under obligation to accept” invitations to attend church.¹⁰⁰ They also encouraged congregations to make some efforts to separate out religious and non-religious activities. For example, the Lutheran manual suggested that congregations “[k]eep religious instruction and English-as-a-Second-Language training distinct”; although “teaching the Christian faith and English at the same time may seem to be a good idea,” the manual cautioned that “[t]o overemphasize religious instruction at the expense of language training is also unfair.”¹⁰¹ And, finally, they endeavored to clarify the goals of refugee resettlement. “The purpose of sponsorship is not to gain new members or convert refugees to Christianity or to Lutheranism,” advised the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service.¹⁰²

The resettlement manuals subtly acknowledged that one underlying objective of resettlement was not only to help refugees find a new home in the United States, but also in Christ. The voluntary agencies described the work of resettlement as a powerful form of Christian missionary outreach. “Demonstrating how the love of Christ has motivated Christians and the Church to reach out to them in love, is the most effective witness,” one World Relief pamphlet explained.¹⁰³ Indeed, World Relief described its mission—its “heartbeat”—as finding

¹⁰⁰ Folder 56, Box 3, The Refugee Studies Center, University of Minnesota Records, General/Multiethnic Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

¹⁰¹ Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, *Face to Face: The Ministry of Refugee Resettlement*, Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., Dept. of Immigration and Refugee Service, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services Assorted Publications, Evangelical Church in America Archive.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Folder 56, Box 3, The Refugee Studies Center, University of Minnesota Records, General/Multiethnic Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

“places for people whose lives will be changed by Jesus Christ.”¹⁰⁴ Almost all of the voluntary agencies prepared materials for Christian evangelism in the languages of the refugees and made them readily available to sponsors. World Relief, while telling sponsors that the refugees’ “cultural value system is built largely on the teachings of Buddhism and Confucianism,” also notes that “even though the majority of the refugees from Southeast Asia are not Christians, they will probably welcome literature and/or tapes in their own language.” World Relief offered several evangelical pamphlets in Indochinese languages. Church World Service offered copies of the Bible in Vietnamese, Khmer, and Lao.¹⁰⁵ Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services also committed \$25,000 for the “New Life” project, which produced “Christian education materials” for Southeast Asian refugees resettled by Lutheran congregations.¹⁰⁶ Visionaries of the “New Life” project desired materials designed for “encounter sessions” aimed at instructing refugees who were curious about the Christianity of their sponsors. “The material prepared should in no way give the wrong impression at this point--and that could happen by the tone being heavily evangelistic or compelling--but should be seen as a natural response to many requests that have come from both Vietnamese and their sponsors that they learn more about Christianity--and that could be happen if the tone is informative and instructive,” the “New Life”

¹⁰⁴ Organizational Files: Correspondences and Miscellanea, 1979-1980, Box 1, American Refugee Committee Records, Minnesota Historical Society.

¹⁰⁵ Church World Service, *Manual for Refugee Sponsorship*, Church World Service Records, Presbyterian Historical Society.

¹⁰⁶ Standing Committee, Protocol, Minutes, March 29-30, 1976, Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., Dept. of Immigration and Refugee Service, Record Group 10/1, Evangelical Church in America Archive.

project visionaries wrote. In their view, such material “will answer the felt need most directly, and out of it will come positive responses.”¹⁰⁷

“What is this H-mong stuff?”

Voluntary agencies’ resettlement orientation manuals provided guidance on another matter: who the Hmong people were and what, precisely, the Hmong religion was that resettlement volunteers were expected to respect and accommodate. When Kathleen Vellenga, sickened by the brutality of a long and morally ambiguous war and spurred to action by the nightly news footage of Vietnamese people fleeing for their lives by military plane and ramshackle boat, she and the other volunteers at Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church, House of Hope Presbyterian Church, and Macalester-Plymouth Church raised funds, gathered housewares, collected clothing, and made apartment rental arrangements to prepare for what they expected would be a family of Vietnamese refugees. Only later did the International Institute officials inform her that the three churches would be assigned a Lao family. And, still later, only shortly before the family was scheduled to arrive, Vellenga learned that the committee had been assigned to sponsor a family of an ethnic group that she had never known before: Hmong.

Almost immediately, church volunteers scrambled to learn what they could about this mysterious group of people. Paula Nessa, a member of Macalester-Plymouth Church and a professional dietician who was the sole member of the committee responsible for finding food for the refugee family, recalled how she dragged her young son to the library one day to look up “Hmong” in the encyclopedia collection there. She had no idea who Hmong people were, where

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

they came from, and, most pertinent to her assignment, what they might want to eat. Finding little information in the encyclopedia, she then visited several local Chinese restaurants to see if any of the people who worked there knew about Hmong food preferences.¹⁰⁸

Nessa's experience was not uncommon; nearly everybody involved in the early stages of Hmong refugee resettlement asked the question: who are the Hmong? Several church volunteers confessed to never having heard of Hmong people until Hmong refugees began to arrive in Saint Paul. "Well, at the beginning, people had a hard time understanding that there's a difference between Vietnamese and Hmong," recalled Tom Kosel of Catholic Charities. "I mean, because it was the Vietnam War, most people thought that everyone that was coming was Vietnamese, and it took a while for people to understand that the Hmong are not Vietnamese, and that was a stumbling block for a lot of people... Just that people had never heard of them before." Every asked the same question: "What is this H-mong stuff?"¹⁰⁹ In general, the people who volunteered to assist with sponsorship projects tended to be fascinated by foreign peoples and cultures in the first place. "I seem to recall there were some in the parish [for whom resettlement] was a curiosity," said Mark Franken, reflecting on his time working at Catholic Charities. "Never had they encountered an Asian person, so this was a *curiosity*, to get to know these newly arriving refugees from Southeast Asia and who they are and how they're different or like us."¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Paula and Jim Nessa, interview by the author, August 28, 2012, Saint Paul, Minnesota, digital recording at part 3-4.

¹⁰⁹ Tom Kosel, interview, digital recording at 59:33-1:02:23.

¹¹⁰ Mark Franken, interview, transcript, p. 6.

Voluntary agencies produced cultural orientation guides for sponsors and community members with precisely the aim that Franken identified: helping people of different cultures get to know each other and to understand how they are similar and different. Voluntary agencies believed that cultural misunderstandings could sour sponsor-refugee relations and undermine the entire resettlement enterprise. However, they were optimistic that these conflicts could be avoided if sponsors were properly educated in the values and worldviews essential to particular cultures. For this reason, the agencies created cultural orientation guides to instruct congregational sponsors in Hmong history, culture, beliefs, and practices. A close reading of cultural orientation literature produced by voluntary agencies for church sponsors illuminates how voluntary agencies used knowledge from anthropologists, missionaries, and Hmong cultural informants to improve cultural understanding, to instruct sponsors in Hmong culture and religion, and to translate Hmong beliefs and practices into a religious tradition that could be recognized and accommodated.

It was through the cultural orientation guides that the missionaries of the Sawyers' and Andrianoffs' era continued to wield influence in how Christians in the United States understood the religious beliefs and practices of Hmong refugees. The Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service distributed a cultural orientation guide entitled "The Hmongs of Laos," which borrowed material from the National Indochinese Clearinghouse, part of the Center for Applied Linguistics. This cultural guide included a section describing the people, culture, beliefs, and folktales of Northern Laos, the region from which many Hmong resettled in the United States originated. This "traditional/historical" article was, in fact, the second chapter of the Master's thesis of a University of Minnesota graduate student named G. Linwood Barney, a Christian and Missionary Alliance missionary who served as a missionary in Laos in the 1950s and worked

alongside the Andrianoffs at the missionary post in Xieng Khouang. “The article has deliberately been left un-updated,” the publisher of the pamphlet wrote, “to give you an unhampered picture of the life that the older Hmong refugees remember.” More accurately, it was a portrait of an evangelical Protestant missionary’s encounter with Hmong religion and culture in Laos at mid-century. Why the producers of this cultural guide would turn to Barney’s particular expertise is not certain; the other half of the cultural guide focused on recent Hmong history in Laos and was written by Yang See Koumarn, a Hmong refugee resettled in the United States.

Barney made no prescriptions for burning home altars as the Sawyers and Andrianoffs did, but his particular perspective as an evangelical missionary in the 1950s shaped his discussion of Hmong religion in important ways. To his credit, his description of Hmong rituals was detailed and even-handed. Noting that the Hmong were “animistic” and believed in many “tlan or spirits” living in the natural world, he described funeral and healing rituals and the significance of the shaman in curing the sick, negotiating with spirits, and interpreting events that portend the future. In identifying the supernatural beings as spirits—and not as “demons” or “devils”—he wrote a primer on Hmong religion that was generally free of many of the damning statements characteristic of the accounts of his contemporaries, the Sawyers and the Andrianoffs.

Barney’s article, however, reproduced some important understandings of indigenous Hmong traditions as a set of primitive beliefs and practices that do not amount to a rightful religion. Throughout his description of Hmong rituals, for instance, Barney maintained a tone of suspicion that conveyed his belief that Hmong traditions are not to be taken seriously as a legitimate religion, even if he did believe that the evil spirits posed real harm. He wrote, for example, that Hmong “history contains certain ancestral heroes who are supposed to have taken on pseudo-spirit qualities.” In describing the gongs and rattles that shamans use in

communicating with the spirit world, Barney uses the word “sacred,” but always placed them in scare quotes. Like both the lowland Lao Buddhists and other CMA missionaries, Barney hesitated to elevate Hmong traditions to the status of “religion,” only once describing Hmong beliefs as “religious.” Finally, Barney emphasized that indigenous Hmong religion is primitive and unstable. He noted that “beliefs among the Hmong are vague and inconsistent concerning life after death and the spirit realm.” His decision to use the word “fetish” to describe the home alters and ritual devices reflected the assessment of Hmong beliefs and practices as unstable, artificial, and primitive, a judgment similar to that of the Sawyers and the Andrianoffs.¹¹¹

Church World Service, another voluntary agency, produced its own cultural orientation materials that contained similar Protestant-centric judgments. As with the Lutherans’ cultural orientation guide, the pamphlet produced by CWS was, to its merit, detailed and descriptive. One pamphlet focused specifically on refugees and their religions and included a section that was dedicated to “animism,” which Church World Service defined as “a belief in spirits, including the spirits of dead people as well as those that have no human origin.” The authors of the pamphlet explained that “all religious beliefs that are not a part of the world’s major faiths are often lumped under animism,” and that “even where some of the major faiths are the official religions of the land, the beliefs of the common people are essentially animistic.” Such was the case of the Hmong, whose indigenous beliefs and rituals include many of the elements outlined by the Church World Service pamphlet: belief in a “creator spirit,” numerous nature-based spirits, “deified ancestors,” and “spirits of the dead,” only some of whom are benevolent.

¹¹¹ Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, *The Hmongs of Laos*, LCUSA DIRS 10/3, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America Archive.

Most striking about the Church World Service’s “Religion of the Refugees” pamphlet was its judgment of animists as opportunistic, self-serving, and amoral—even immoral. In contrast to people (specifically, Christians) who strive to lead lives of virtue in order to bring honor to God, animists, according to the authors of this pamphlet, “are far more anxious to placate the evil spirits that may do them harm than to honor the good spirits who might help them.” Moreover, “rather than seeing themselves as passive victims of the spirit world, animists believe they can use spirit forces for their own benefit” through rituals, sacrifices, offerings, fetishes, and incantations. Ultimately, the authors of the pamphlet explained that “[b]ecause of their belief that gods, spirits, and people are alike, animists are essentially non-ethical. They believe religious practices are only for getting the best advantage in the power struggle of the spirit world. The animist might turn for religious guidance to the most immoral man of the village, a medicine man whose reputation for antisocial acts may include everything from rape to murder. What matters for the animist is that this person knows the secrets of spiritual power.”

At the end of the article, the authors of the pamphlet underscore what they saw as the critical differences between animism and Christianity: the former’s emphasis on power and agency and the latter’s emphasis on grace. “It should be pointed out here that it is a big step from animism to Christianity,” they wrote. “It is a step from the basic mistrust of an irresponsible spirit world, that has to be persuaded to do good, all the way to confidence in an eternal loving God. Animists in the United States may be very happy to be called Christian in order to recap whatever benefits that action might bring without really understanding what Christianity is all about. For animists, whatever worship brings the most benefits is the proper worship.”¹¹²

¹¹² Church World Service, *Religion of the Refugees*, Pamphlets Relating to Refugee Relief and Assistance,” Minnesota Historical Society. The individual authors of this pamphlet are unknown.

While “Religion of the Refugees” portrayed animists as self-serving, amoral, and opportunistic, another cultural orientation guide called attention to the fact that Hmong—and Southeast Asian people more generally—are, among other things, not rational. In Church World Service’s second pamphlet, “A Guide to Two Cultures,” the agency aimed to instruct congregational sponsors in the fundamental cultural differences between American and Indochinese people, often doing so with a series of essentialist *us v. them* cultural oppositions intended to be an easy guide to how to get along with a Southeast Asian person. “Rapport is ‘a thing of the spirit’; you may sometimes break his rules of social conduct—and he yours—and still become friends,” read the guide’s introduction. “But at least learn some rules even if, at first, you don’t understand the traditions or the religious basis behind them.” Among the most important differences highlighted by this guide is Americans’ emphasis on thinking and Indochinese people’s emphasis on feeling. “REASONS vs. SENTIMENT,” read the guide, were “a basic difference in the American and Indochinese approach to life; this personal approach of the Indochinese cannot be emphasized enough.”¹¹³

Though it is not clear how congregational sponsors read and interpreted these cultural orientation guides, they were at least well circulated. Moreover, the abundant stories about cultural misunderstanding shared by both refugees and sponsors suggest that there was a desire and a need for resources that offered information about cultural and religious differences, especially about lesser known ethnic groups like the Hmong. Almost a decade and a half after the first Hmong refugee family arrived in the United States, churches were still hosting cultural orientation events for the congregation and the broader community. First Lutheran Church, for

¹¹³ Church World Service, *A Guide to Two Cultures*, Pamphlets Relating to Refugee Relief and Assistance, Minnesota Historical Society.

example, sponsored a “Seminar on SE Asian Refugees” to help Saint Paul residents learn about their Hmong, Laotians, Vietnamese, and Cambodians neighbors. “We’ll talk about why these people are making new lives in this country and what specific obstacles they have to overcome,” the sponsors of the event explained in the church bulletin. “Open your minds and hearts,” they urged. “With knowledge comes understanding.”¹¹⁴ However, the problem with much of the voluntary agencies’ cultural orientation material was that the people who produced knowledge with the responsibility of promoting understanding did so constrained by their own worldview and cultural and religious assumptions.

Ultimately, despite all of the advice that voluntary agencies offered congregational volunteers, the most important arena in which Christian resettlement workers endeavored to know and understand people who were religiously and culturally different from themselves was through the personal relationships in the face-to-face ministry of resettlement work. The on-the-ground experiences of this public-private, church-state resettlement effort is the focus of the next two chapters.

Since the arrival of the Vang family in 1976, Minnesota has acquired a reputation for having a well-organized refugee services infrastructure that was formed and tested during the large wave of Southeast Asian, and particularly Hmong, refugees in the 1970s and 1980s. Refugee resettlement in Minnesota remains a public-private endeavor, and religious institutions are still central players. However, congregational sponsorship, as model for resettlement, fell out of favor in the 1980s, for reasons that are not clearly known. Some scholars have cited

¹¹⁴ “Getting to Know You,” *First Lutheran Herald*, August 1990, Minnesota Historical Society.

“compassion fatigue,” and resettlement workers have explained that refugee assistance has moved towards a “case management” system in which voluntary agencies offer more centralized services.¹¹⁵ For Hmong resettlement, at least, the link between Hmong refugees and church sponsorship diminished as Hmong families achieved enough economic stability to petition for, sponsor, and support family members on their own.¹¹⁶ Still, the practice of delegating resettlement duties to congregations continues to this day. Protestant voluntary agencies, especially Church World Service and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, continue to use congregations, though not as much as they have in the past.¹¹⁷

Twin Cities congregations involved with Hmong resettlement remain proud of their accomplishments, not just as a statement of their humanitarian commitment and of Christian love, but also as a statement about life in America. At Dayton Avenue Church, Kathy Vellenga was gratified to point out that the Vang family was surprised that it was the church, and not the government, that was assisting the refugees. Vellenga’s story is not entirely accurate; in truth, it was both the government and the churches that welcomed and resettled the Hmong. But Vellenga’s claim about the centrality of churches in resettlement work reproduced a popular fiction about government in America—that, unlike the God-less communists whom the Hmong had fled, American lives were not dictated by the state. As this story goes, it was everyday people, motivated by Christian compassion and good old-fashioned neighborliness, who did the real work.

¹¹⁵ North, Lewin, and Wagner, *Kaleidoscope*, 86.

¹¹⁶ Downing, *Hmong Resettlement Study Site Report: Minneapolis-St. Paul*, 17.

¹¹⁷ Ives, Sinha, and Cnaan, “Who Is Welcoming the Stranger?,” 75.

Chapter Three:

American Refugee Resettlement Policy and the Disruption of Indigenous Hmong Religion

In 1987, Nao Thao rode her first airplane—an airplane that would bring her from a dismal life in a refugee camp in Thailand to a bright new future in the United States. “We were so happy that we were coming to a country that has the most freedom, that everyone has equal opportunity,” she said. With great excitement, she and her family arrived at the airport, where they were directed to make their way through a maze of doors and hallways. “We kept walking and walking and walking in the hall, until people say, ‘Sit down,’” she recalled. “...And the next time, they said, ‘Here we are in Hong Kong!’ And we said, ‘Hong Kong? But we’re sitting in here!’” The experience of riding the airplane perplexed her family, she recounted with a laugh. “In the back of our minds, [we thought], ‘Wow! We’re supposed to ride the airplane, but we never climbed into the airplane. How can we get from one place to the next?’” The adventure piqued their curiosity and heightened their anticipation. But if the airplane offered delightful surprises, their destination did not. “[T]he whole time we never were able to get outside until we got to Eau Claire, and then we got off the plane,” she said. “Oh my gosh, the minute we stepped out the door, the wind blew. It was so cold, I almost could not breathe. I said, ‘This is America?’”

Confusion and curiosity, happiness and heartache: the mixed emotions that Nao Thao felt as she journeyed by airplane to the United States were, in many ways, emblematic of the upheaval and uprooting experienced by Hmong refugees. Much has been written about the trauma of Hmong resettlement and the ways in which refugee migration to the United States transformed Hmong politics, economy, society, and culture. Migration, however, is also “a

spiritual event.”¹ As had been the case for many generations of migrants before them, Hmong refugees’ experiences in adjusting to American life shaped the religious choices of individuals and the long-term religious trajectories of communities. Indeed, even though she imagined the United States to be “a country that has the most freedom,” Nao Thao—who later became a practicing shaman—discovered that Hmong people were not, in fact, free, especially when it came to practicing their indigenous religion.

In this chapter, I explore the “spiritual event” of Hmong refugee migration, paying particular attention to the challenges that Hmong refugees faced in rebuilding their lives, and transplanting their indigenous religion, in the United States. I argue that American refugee resettlement policies placed pressure for religious conformity and disrupted the practice of indigenous Hmong religion. A policy of dispersing refugees across the country separated Hmong refugees from family members whose presence and active participation were necessary for traditional rituals. Refugee resettlement preference categories split generations, depriving Hmong refugees resettled in the United States of elders whose expertise was needed to conduct traditional rituals. Finally, because of resettlement policies, Hmong refugees found themselves far from the mountain farms and forests they had known, living instead in urban settings where they found it difficult to find livestock and open space needed to practice the traditional rituals rooted in their historically agrarian culture. Thus, despite efforts to make refugee assistance a religiously neutral enterprise, the state shaped indigenous Hmong religious life in profound and surprising ways.

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¹ Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 150.

“We think we got lost”

When Kathleen Vellenga welcomed the Vang family at the airport in 1976, she met the first members of Twin Cities Hmong community that would later become the unofficial “Hmong Capital of the U.S.”² Its emergence as an epicenter of Hmong American life occurred early on. In 1976, the year that the Hmong were first accepted for resettlement under the Lao Parole Program and the year that Kathleen Vellenga and her congregation sponsored the Vang family, only 150 Hmong refugees resided in the Twin Cities. Five years later, the Minnesota State Refugee Program Office estimated that 10,000 Hmong lived in Minneapolis and Saint Paul, earning the Twin Cities the distinction of having with the highest urban concentration of Hmong Americans in the United States. A high birthrate, a vigorous sponsorship and resettlement effort, and an influx of Hmong refugees migrating from other sites of resettlement in the United States all contributed to the dramatic growth of the Twin Cities Hmong population during this period. By the 1980s, Hmong refugees were petitioning and sponsoring relatives, further growing the Hmong population.³ Though Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodian refugees also resettled in Minnesota, the Hmong comprised the largest Southeast Asian refugee community. By 1980, between 12,000 and 14,000 Southeast Asian refugees called Minnesota home, and the great majority of these refugees were Hmong living in Saint Paul and Minneapolis.⁴ The Twin Cities

² Kari Lydersen, “Hmong Capital Of U.S. Girds For New Influx,” *Washington Post*, July 16, 2004.

³ Downing, *Hmong Resettlement Study Site Report: Minneapolis-St. Paul*, 12, 14, 17.

⁴ State Plan for Refugees, FY 81, Governor’s Refugee Resettlement Office, 1976-1977, Minnesota Dept. of Public Welfare, Refugee Program Office Records, Minnesota Historical Society, State Archives.

were thus a unique resettlement site: whereas other sites of heavy Southeast Asian resettlement tended to have multiethnic populations, as in California, the Hmong were the dominant refugee group in the Twin Cities from 1979 onward.⁵

Although they were only one of several Southeast Asian ethnic groups resettled in the United States under the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act, the Hmong acquired the reputation as the most exotic and adrift in American society. “No other newcomers to the United States suffered greater culture shock than these primitive tribesmen who suddenly crash-landed in a society light years away from their own,” the Associated Press reported in 1984. The Hmong journey to the United States was “an odyssey through time as well as through miles, from thatched roofs to skyscrapers, from pre-literacy to computers, from the Stone Age to the Space Age.” Popular depictions of the Hmong highlighted their belief that the Earth is flat and that malevolent spirits caused sudden death in the middle of the night.⁶ Descriptions of the Hmong experience in the United States deployed dramatic imagery of a disastrous “clash” of culture, in which hapless Hmong refugees found themselves lost in a “land of giants.”⁷

However romantic or overdrawn this portrayal, the Hmong undoubtedly faced a difficult transition to life in the United States. The 1984 Hmong Resettlement Study, prepared by the University of Minnesota’s Center for Urban and Regional Affairs for the United States Office of Refugee Resettlement, detailed the degree and scope of the economic, social, and cultural

⁵ Downing, *Hmong Resettlement Study Site Report: Minneapolis-St. Paul*, 68.

⁶ Nancy Shullins, “Hmong Refugees Undergo Severe Culture Shock,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 8, 1984.

⁷ See, for example, Spencer Sherman, “The Hmong in America,” *National Geographic*, October 1988, 586-609;

dislocation experienced by the Hmong in the Twin Cities. This Hmong Resettlement Study, which was one of six profiles of Hmong resettlement efforts in metropolitan areas across the United States, reflected the highest priorities of both government and voluntary agencies: reducing refugee dependence on public assistance and promoting refugees' achievement of economic self-sufficiency and cultural integration.

The authors of the Hmong Resettlement Study found that most Hmong refugees had rural backgrounds and possessed few job skills appropriate for a modern, industrialized economy. 52% of the heads of households identified their previous work as soldiers, while 16% identified as farmers and 16% as students. "There appear to be many households in which the principal wage-earner brought no usable skills from Laos and has received no job training in the U.S.," the researchers observed.⁸ Established employment programs, such as the Minnesota State Job Service, "were unable to meet the need [of Hmong refugees] because they were built upon the assumption that their client populations understood English and American job-finding strategies and possessed some kind of job-related skills."⁹

Most Hmong refugees had little, if any, formal schooling. 74% of adult Hmong in the Twin Cities had received no formal education in Laos: 55% of men, and 89% of women. Those who were fortunate enough to have had any education at all typically had very little: 23% of men and 5% of women had attended school longer than three years. Many were not literate. Only half could read Hmong, and about a third could read Lao. In addition, few Hmong refugees spoke English. The Hmong Resettlement Study found that, in one meeting with male heads of

⁸ Downing, *Hmong Resettlement Study Site Report: Minneapolis-St. Paul*, 41.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

households, only 13% had received English instruction before resettling in the United States.¹⁰

The most common problem identified by Hmong household heads surveyed was the lack of English skills.¹¹ “Life is difficult for me,” one respondent said. “Language is the worst problem. Without English I cannot get a job. I don’t like to live off the government. I have looked for a job many times...I really doubt that the Americans will ever hire me. I would like to go back to Laos.”¹²

Given these circumstances, Hmong refugees struggled to find employment. According to one measure, 29% of Hmong households had an employed member, and only 3% of Hmong households had two or more employed members. Only 15% of adult Hmong were working, and only 21% of Hmong household heads were employed. 38% of those who were unemployed were actively seeking a job, but the remainder was not, for several reasons: lack of English proficiency, educational commitments, lack of skills, family responsibilities, health difficulties, and old age. The statistics offered by the Minnesota State Refugee Office were somewhat better, though concerning nonetheless. According to these findings, 46% of Hmong households had at least one employed member in 1982. Those who did have jobs were underemployed. Half of the employed group worked less than thirty hours each week. They often held unskilled minimum wage jobs in food service, maintenance work, factory assembly, and in refugee services—jobs that did not provide sufficient income for supporting a large Hmong family.¹³ As a result, many Hmong relied on some form of public assistance. 68% of Hmong in the Twin Cities received

¹⁰ Ibid., 54.

¹¹ Ibid., 55.

¹² Ibid., 62.

¹³ Ibid., 20, 22, 23.

AFDC and 16% received General Assistance (GA). Many also received Refugee Cash Assistance, for which refugees were eligible for the first thirty-six (and, later, eighteen) months after arrival.¹⁴ In 1982, 90% of the Asian families in public housing in Saint Paul were Hmong; of the 7,000 Hmong residing in Ramsey County, 3,000 lived in public housing.¹⁵

The case files of 5,000 Hmong refugees resettled by the International Institute, a local affiliate of the voluntary agency American Council for Nationalities Service, reveal poignant stories of human suffering and vulnerability unexpressed by these statistics. In this archival collection are handwritten notes from the daily logbook maintained by International Institute caseworkers who visited homes of Hmong refugee families. In these case files, one sees how poorly prepared the Hmong were for life in the United States. In one case, a man was badly injured in the war, reducing his ability to use carpentry skills. “Would like to make clothes for soldiers!!” noted the voluntary agency official who interviewed him, even though the demand for military tailors in the Twin Cities was minimal.¹⁶ Many of the notes in these case files describe situations of urgent poverty. In one family’s file, the caseworker noted that “the family received less money [from AFDC] but the rent went up. no food to feed the children.” The next day, the International Institute case worker wrote, “make home visit[.] find out the family don't have any thing in the refrigerator except some juice[.] we give them 50 lbs. of rice[.] make referral to food shelter near by.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid., 34.

¹⁵ Ibid., 33-34.

¹⁶ Box 51 Case Files, International Institute of Minnesota Records, IHRC3257, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

¹⁷ Box 52, Case Files, International Institute of Minnesota Records, IHRC3257, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

More than anything, these case files reveal a population suffering not only from the upheaval of migration, but the trauma of war. One woman, an English as a Second Language teacher, wrote in her evaluation of a Hmong woman:

[She] daydreams constantly...[She] learns quickly if I can get her attention. This is extremely difficult...she tries very hard and when she pays attention, she does fine. But she loses interest quickly and doesn't concentrate. She has mentioned that she lost her entire family. They were shot by the Vietnamese...[She] seems motivated and her learning pace depends directly on her attention span. She daydreams a lot and this slows her down in both English and Math. She can count and add small numbers. She should stay in low level.¹⁸

Another student received a similar evaluation from her English teacher. “[She] lost her whole family and is still suffering from shock,” wrote the teacher. “She often day-dreams or sleeps in class. Her responsiveness has increased slowly but still has a way to go in becoming involved. She's bright and I feel will soar as soon as she gets through her depression...[She] has been recovering from great personal tragedy.”¹⁹ If it was not the loss of loved ones that gave rise to such sorrow, it was the pressures of making a life in a new country. “[He] is systematic in his study and he is well-respected,” one English teacher wrote in her evaluation of one older male student. “Recently he has been distracted which I believe is due to a sudden loss of respect in an environment in which he cannot solve the problems of his people.” Another teacher noted that

¹⁸ Box 21, Case Files, International Institute of Minnesota Records, IHRC3257, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

¹⁹ Box 22, Case Files, International Institute of Minnesota Records, IHRC3257, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

her student “gets up at 5:00 a.m., has several children, drinks a can of pop for breakfast and can hardly keep her eyes open in class. Consequently, hasn't learned much beyond ‘I don't know.’”²⁰

Nao Thao’s family arrived in the United States after five years of living in limbo in the refugee camps in Thailand. She and her family knew that returning to Laos was dangerous, but they knew little about what a future in the United States might hold. When she and her family finally arrived in the United States in November 1987, they were trembling with excitement—until they peered out the window and their eyes fell upon the forlorn landscape of Eau Claire in late fall. Seeing the bare branches of the trees and the brown, bleak buildings, they wondered if they had arrived in “a ghost town.” Lonely and overwhelmed, they longed to return to Thailand and sent tearful messages recorded on a cassette tapes to relatives in the refugee camps, warning them not to come to the United States. “Don’t look forward,” Nao Thao and her family said. “We think we got lost.”²¹

“You just cannot do [it] on your own”

Looking back on the initial years of resettlement in the United States, Hmong refugees emphasized that so much of life was surprising and new to them, whether it was learning how to use a stove, purchase groceries, ride city buses, and shovel sidewalks after a Saint Paul snowstorm. And yet, in embracing all these changes, many Hmong refugees endeavored to continue the ritual traditions that, for centuries, had secured spiritual and bodily wellbeing for

²⁰ Box 21, Case Files, International Institute of Minnesota Records, IHRC3257, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

²¹ Nao Thao, interview, digital recording at part 7.

their families and their community. Writing about “the uprooted” immigrants from Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth century, the immigration historian Oscar Handlin observed that “[a] man holds dear what little is left. When much is lost, there is no risking the remainder.”²²

Hmong refugees arrived in the United States having lost their homes and their loved ones throughout a decade of brutal war; it was with great urgency, then, that many Hmong refugees like Sia Ly Thao remained committed to sustaining the traditions that kept them connected with their homeland, their ancestors, their history, and their culture. “Even if our traditional religion is hard to follow,” she said, “we must keep true to it.”²³ Indeed, Hmong indigenous Hmong religion was hard to follow in the United States, in no small because of American refugee resettlement policies.

To meet the goals of assisting refugees in attaining self-sufficiency and preventing their reliance on public assistance goals, refugee resettlement officials pursued a policy of dispersal that spread refugees across the country, sending them to cities as far flung as Pasadena and Providence. These scatter policies were not necessarily a novel move. Other Western nations have embraced dispersal plans in their resettlement programs, while the resettlement of Cuban asylees in the 1960s had also involved incentives to draw them away from ethnic enclaves.²⁴ Southeast Asian resettlement, however, marked certain departure in policy. For one, Cuban migrants were asylees, not refugees; the government then was responding to Cubans who had

²² Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted*, Second Edition (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 105.

²³ Sia Ly Thao, interview by Paul Hillmer, Hmong Oral History Project, Concordia University, transcript, accessed January 18, 2014, http://homepages.csp.edu/hillmer/Interviews/Sia_Ly_Thao.html.

²⁴ See Vaughan Robinson, Roger Andersson, and Sako Musterd, *Spreading the “Burden”?: A Review of Policies to Disperse Asylum Seekers and Refugees* (Bristol: The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2003).

already arrived on American shores, and to these asylees the government only offered incentives. In contrast, the resettlement of the Hmong, Lao, Vietnamese, and Cambodian involved refugees, and the federal government had more control over the course of their migration, directing it from the overseas refugee camps until their resettlement in the United States.

Refugee resettlement officials pursued this scatter policy for several reasons. For one, they aimed to promote participation in the workforce and believed that it would be more produce to relocate refugees to communities where there were ample opportunities for employment. They also hoped to facilitate cultural assimilation and to prevent the formation of ethnic enclaves. As L. Dean Brown, then chairman of the Interagency Task Force on Refugees, argued, government policies that deliberately suppressed the formation of “new ethnic communities” would help refugees to assimilate more quickly and minimize the burden that refugees would impose on communities that already had significant immigrant populations.²⁵ Knowing that some cities and states were more heavily impacted by refugee arrivals than others, resettlement officials believed that dispersal would allow states to share the responsibility of resettlement evenly and fairly and minimize the possibility of local backlash against refugee populations. Finally, the government depended on volunteer sponsors to help carry the financial burden of resettlement and to undertake much of the day-to-day labor of assisting refugees. By the middle of the 1980s, many Hmong refugees already resettled in the United States were able to serve as sponsors for their relatives. In the 1970s and early 1980s, however, the federal government

²⁵ L. Dean Brown, “Congress Approves Indochinese Refugee Aid,” *1975 Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, 317.

relied heavily on volunteer sponsors, often congregations, which were located throughout the country.²⁶

Because of these policies, Hmong people often found themselves isolated in small towns. Cher Vang and his immediate family, sponsored by a Lutheran church, first lived in rural Wisconsin in a town called Loganville, which had a population of a couple hundred people. “We came to a small town and we felt kind of lonely,” he said. “We say to our sponsors, ‘We cannot stay here, because there’s just five of us in the family.’” In response, his church sponsors agreed to help his parents come over from Thailand.²⁷ Similarly, Khu Thao recalled how she landed in Iowa because a sponsor was available there. “We didn't know anyone in Iowa,” she said. She later contacted relatives who lived in Minnesota and, a year after she first arrived, these relatives traveled down to Iowa to pick her up, much to her relief. “I was so happy to see them,” she said. “I thought that I had lost contact with them all.”²⁸ Tzianeng Vang remembered that his father requested a tape recorder so that he could record and send tape cassette messages to relatives “to tell them where we are and for them to come and rescue us.”²⁹

This scatter policy, while well intentioned, had important consequences for Hmong religious life, as it broke up families and deprived Hmong refugees of kin whose active

²⁶ Vang, *Hmong America*, 46–49; David Haines, “Southeast Asian Refugees in the United States: The Interaction of Kinship and Public Policy,” in *Asian American Family Life and Community*, ed. Franklin Ng (New York: Garland, 1998), 198–199.

²⁷ Cher Vang, Oral History Interviews of the Hmong Oral Histories Project, 1991-1993, Minnesota Historical Society, transcript, p. 1.

²⁸ Khu Thao, interview by Kelly Vang, translated by Peter Chou Vang, Hmong Oral History Project, Concordia University, transcript, accessed January 18, 2014, http://homepages.csp.edu/hillmer/Interviews/Khu_Thao.html.

²⁹ Tzianeng Vang, interview by the author, September 5, 2012, Saint Paul, Minnesota, digital recording at part 9.

participation was necessary for the proper practice of traditional rituals. Kia Vue and her family were sponsored by a Catholic parish and resettled in a little town in Oklahoma. They enjoyed the quaint community and found the priest and the volunteers from the church to be “very nice,” but they found being isolated in a small community, with no Hmong people for miles around, to be a deeply saddening experience.³⁰ “It was almost like we landed in jail,” she said. “That’s how we felt in Oklahoma.”³¹ In these circumstances, abandoning indigenous Hmong religion seemed prudent. “[W]e decided that there were no Hmong around, so it’s not going to be helpful for us to continue our practices,” she said. She later added that, had she resettled in a town with a large Hmong population, such as Fresno or Saint Paul, she and her family would have made different religious choices and “would be a lot happier.”³²

Similarly, Yong Kaye Moua recalled that the separation of his family members—and the uncertainty of whether they would be able to reunite with them ever again—caused his family to question the feasibility of maintaining their indigenous traditions in the United States. “We wish to do [these rituals], but in our tradition, you just cannot do on your own,” he said. “You can do many steps, even in your home, because when you have [some] worry, concern, you can pray for your ancestor, your tradition. But if we end up having a wedding, having someone pass away, we need a lot of people to help.” For Yong Kaye Moua, the people he would normally turn to for help with these rituals were located not just across the country, but around the world: he and his wife and children were sponsored by Trinity Lutheran Church in Eau Claire, Wisconsin; his uncle, the leader of the extended family, was resettled in Providence, Rhode Island; still other

³⁰ Kia Vue, interview, digital recording at part 7.

³¹ Ibid., digital recording at part 9.

³² Ibid., digital recording at part 8.

relatives were sent to California or remained in the refugee camps in Thailand. “At that time [before the Refugee Act of 1980], we don’t know that the rest of the people will be able to come,” he recalled. Yong Kaye Moua telephoned the family members who were accepted for resettlement in the United States, and they made a collective decision to discontinue practicing their traditional religion, a move initiated by the family leader in Providence. “He mentioned to us that now, since we came to America, each of us live distant to each other, so we need to change to Christian,” he said.³³ He decided, when he first arrived, that the situation seemed to require that he commit to either indigenous Hmong religion or Christianity. His family, he said, had “one foot on each different boat,” and the situation felt unstable. “You have to decide which way, which boat that you would like to stand in,” he explained. It was better “just [to] make only one way.”³⁴

The decisions of early-arriving refugees like Yong Kaye Moua often influenced the choices of Hmong refugees who resettled in the same community later. Tzianeng Vang said that, in the town where he lived in Pennsylvania, most of the Hmong refugee community, including his relatives, was already Christian. He and his parents became Christian, even though his father was committed to indigenous Hmong religion, since it was simply too difficult to pursue indigenous Hmong religion alone. His father, he said, realized that needed to “take the easy way

³³ Houa Vue Moua and Yong Kaye Moua, interview, digital recording at part 7.

³⁴ Ibid., digital recording at part 8. In her research on Hmong refugees resettled in the San Francisco Bay Area, Kay Taber also found that Hmong refugees felt compelled to adopt Christianity because they were separated from kin whose participation was necessary for indigenous Hmong rituals. The absence of relatives made traditional ceremonies “impossible,” she argued. See Kay Taber, “Hmong Kinship in Transition,” *Treganza Anthropology Museum Papers* 16 (1994): 51.

out” and do “a new way” because “everybody’s doing it.”³⁵ His mother and father became devout Southern Baptists. “In Pennsylvania, all your peers go to church, your relatives go to church, not many people find it plausible, you know, pleasing to continue the animist way,” he said. “So everybody goes to church, so you just go.”³⁶ Mao Yang was sponsored by a Baptist church that encouraged her to become Christian. “She did not want to go,” her daughter-in-law explained, because “she was still waiting to get connected with the relative who was already here, so that she could go continue her old practices.”³⁷ None of her relatives arrived in Illinois, however, and living in a town where most of the Hmong people were Baptists who were uncompromising in their repudiation of traditional rituals, she felt she simply had no option other than to become Baptist herself. Practicing indigenous Hmong religion was impossible to do on one’s own, and in that small town, she said, “there was just no Hmong people who did it!”³⁸

Attempts by government and voluntary agency officials to disperse Hmong refugees ultimately failed, and secondary migration began almost immediately, with Hmong refugees relocating to new cities to reunite with family members sometimes within weeks, even days, after their arrival in the United States. Cziasarh Neng Yang, for instance, left Providence, his initial site of resettlement, to reunite with his brother in Columbus, Ohio, just two weeks after he first set foot in Rhode Island.³⁹ A policy of dispersal clashed with the clan-centered culture of the Hmong, setting into motion the mass secondary migration of thousands of Hmong to rejoin kin

³⁵ Tzianeng Vang, interview, digital recording at part 8.

³⁶ Ibid., digital recording at part 11.

³⁷ Mao Yang, interview by the author, translated by Paj Ntaub Lis, August 12, 2012, Saint Paul, Minnesota, digital recording at 27:00-28:00.

³⁸ Ibid., digital recording at 45:00-46:00.

³⁹ Cziasarh Neng Yang, interview, digital recording at part 7.

resettled elsewhere and to pursue the uniquely Hmong American dream of leading a life of subsistence farming in central California, where their leader, Vang Pao, had resettled.⁴⁰ By 1985, nearly a decade after the first Hmong refugees arrived in the United States, two epicenters of Hmong American life had emerged: the Twin Cities, where 8,500 Hmong resided, and California's Central Valley, where Fresno was home 10,000 Hmong people.⁴¹

Reunification with relatives facilitated a return to indigenous Hmong religion. Mao Yang returned to indigenous Hmong religion when she was able to live in an area of the country where, in contrast to the small town in Illinois where she was initially resettled, there were more Hmong people who knew about Hmong traditional rituals. In Fresno, she found it easier to practice rituals because there were more recently arrived family members who preferred to practice indigenous Hmong religion rather than Christianity. "The new arrivals were fresh with the traditions, and they came and they had resources, too," she said. In Fresno, she was able to live near a family member—a grandfather—who was a shaman.⁴²

Relocation did not happen overnight, however, nor was it always possible. "Even for yourself, if you would like to go to where your family lives, or your relatives, you cannot find jobs there," said Yong Kaye Moua.⁴³ Moving away from the site of initial resettlement meant leaving not only jobs, but the furnished homes, educational opportunities, and financial support

⁴⁰ Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall down*, 231; John Fincke, "Secondary Migration to California's Central Valley," in *The Hmong in Transition*, ed. Glenn Hendricks, Bruce Downing, and Amos Deinard (New York: Center for Migration Studies and the Southeast Asian Refugee Studies Project of the University of Minnesota, 1986), 184–186.

⁴¹ Vang, *Hmong America*, 47.

⁴² Mao Yang, interview, digital recording at 1:01:00-1:02:00.

⁴³ Houa Vue Moua and Yong Kaye Moua, interview, digital recording at part 9.

offered by church sponsors and voluntary agencies, which often did not assist refugees who chose to relocate to a new city or state.⁴⁴ Thus, despite the fact that Hmong refugees resisted dispersal and strove to reconstitute their families and communities in the United States, doing so was not easy. Even if people were able to relocate, the experience of dispersal left a mark on the Hmong and shaped their refugee experience, including their religious lives. As Yong Kaye's story illustrates, by the time families were finally able to reunite, the scatter policy and sponsorship system had already left its mark on Hmong religious beliefs and practices.

“You have nobody to give you the proper way how to conduct the ritual”

The preference system under which refugees gained admission into the United States was another aspect of refugee resettlement policies that produced unexpected challenges to indigenous Hmong religion. According to Carl Bon Tempo, refugee preference categories were often haphazardly written and highly elastic, responsive to changing refugee populations and evolving political landscapes. Southeast Asian refugee resettlement categories, for example, were based on both the longstanding principle that the United States should reward its Cold War allies and the emerging commitment to human rights and humanitarianism.⁴⁵ In general, though, Hmong individuals who served in the military and who were employed by the United States government during the war received highest priority, as they were considered “high risk.” Most

⁴⁴ Vang, *Hmong America*, 49.

⁴⁵ Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 155–156.

of these first arrivals were young people and former members of the clandestine army that supported the CIA during the war.⁴⁶

Thus, the people who arrived in the United States first tended to be younger people who had little knowledge of traditional Hmong rituals. Left behind in the refugee camps in Thailand were the elders who were the Hmong community's spiritual and cultural leaders and the revered authorities on the proper practice of traditional rituals.⁴⁷ Having had less direct involvement with the war, these elders fell under a different preference category, and their arrival in the United States was delayed until much later, when their children were able to sponsor them. Jacque Lemoine, an anthropologist and expert on Hmong shamanism, counted 30 shamans in 90 Hmong households in the refugee camps. Shamans, however, were far less common in the United States in the early 1980s, in part because shamans were more reluctant to leave Asia, but also because, as Lemoine argued, they "were excluded from the resettlement list as useless religious practitioners."⁴⁸

In the initial years of resettlement, young Hmong refugees thus found themselves spiritually adrift in the United States, where they had little knowledge or guidance on how to conduct traditional ceremonies. "Back in Laos and in Thailand, we always depend on...the elders who know how to do this ritual," said Cziasarh Neng Yang. "Now, when you are alone in a

⁴⁶ Vang, *Hmong America*, 41.

⁴⁷ Among other things, Hmong elders are essential for the practice and preservation of indigenous Hmong religion. According to Song Lee, they "provide guidance and support in the spiritual health and development of younger generations" and "play a role in passing on their knowledge of traditional rites, rituals, and the Hmong language." See Song Lee, "The Challenges and Contributions of Hmong American Elders: A Personal and Professional Perspective," in *Hmong and American: From Refugees to Citizens*, ed. Vincent Her and Mary Louise Buley-Meissner (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2012), 135, 136.

⁴⁸ Lemoine, "Shamanism in the Context of Hmong Resettlement," 346.

foreign land, and you have nobody to give you the proper way how to conduct the ritual or the tradition, you just don't know...what to do or how to do it."⁴⁹ Young people had some experience with traditional practices, but their knowledge was often superficial at best. "Of course when my parents held ceremonies with shamans or had soul calling ceremonies (*hu plig*) I helped, but I was only there as an observer," said Bo Thao, a Hmong woman resettled in Minnesota. "If I were to fully practice animism today I don't think could do it. I don't know enough."⁵⁰ Kim Yang expressed a similar concern about her lack of traditional ritual knowledge. "[I]f someone in your household passes away, we will not know what to do," she said. "We have to learn to go to church and just in the event that there is someone who passed away in your household, so you can get help and know what to do. I believe that we need to change, because we are living in a new country that has lots of changes, so we need to change too."⁵¹

Young Hmong were reluctant to attempt to undertake traditional rituals with which they had limited knowledge and experience. Making errors in ritual practices could have severe consequences for Hmong people residing in the both the spiritual and the seen world. "If [young people] don't spend time learning the old ways exactly, they may call the wrong spirit," said Wang Kao Her. "They must follow 'the rules' exactly step by step. When something is done wrong, the bad spirit may punish or curse a family for many generations. This worries people."⁵²

⁴⁹ Cziasarh Neng Yang, interview, digital recording at part 12.

⁵⁰ Bo Thao, OH86.1, Oral History Interviews of the Hmong Women's Action Team Oral History Project (Hmoob Thaj Yeeb Oral History Project) 1999-2000, Minnesota Historical Society, transcript, p. 12-13.

⁵¹ Kim Yang, interview, transcript, p. 12. See also Desan, "A Change of Faith for Hmong Refugees."

⁵² Southeast Asian Ministry Records, Saint Paul Area Synod, Saint Paul, Minnesota.

Many Hmong refugees, alone in the United States without elders to guide them, thus found themselves in a spiritual quandary: they could choose not to perform traditional rituals, a decision that would provoke the ire of spirits, or they could attempt to do the rituals with the high likelihood that they would make an error—and still anger the spirits.

The story of the Vang family illustrates how these concerns shaped Hmong refugees' religious choices. Neng Vang and her daughter Paj Ntaub Lis explained how, when their family first arrived in Minnesota in 1989, they needed to set up a household altar called a *xwm kab* but did not know how to do so properly. Without an altar, they believed that their new house was vulnerable to malevolent spirits, and they believed that a spiritual guardian was necessary. A member of one of the Lutheran congregations or agencies that had sponsored the family had given them a crucifix, which the family hung on the living room wall. Neng Vang and her husband hoped that, by putting the crucifix in their house, Jesus would offer her family spiritual protection and the Christian God would prevent any evil spirits from harming her family. Paj Ntaub Lis explained, "Because Hmong people, we believe that whether you have Buddha or whatever, you have something to protect your home, and I think Jesus Christ served us well in the few probably days that it was up, you know, as protection of the home." After a couple years, however, a frightening apparition appeared to Neng Vang in the night and impressed upon the family that they had made a grave error. Paj Ntaub Lis described the incident that she and her mother interpreted as a warning from the spirits in the unseen world:

So my mother woke up the one night, and she saw the cross shaking on the wall. She was up—I mean, she wasn't sleeping. She woke up, and so she saw it shaking on the wall and that scared her...And so she felt that maybe because we have our own beliefs in ancestors, that she felt that, 'Ooh, they're probably not happy.' So then she thinks she might have made a mistake. And that's why she saw it—they felt she made a mistake. And that's why she threw it out.

Soon after, the family found an elder to assist in the creation of a *xwm kab* in their living room, and there were, as Paj Ntaub Lis said, “no more crosses in the home.”⁵³

In this void of ritual knowledge and leadership, young Hmong refugees who were resettled in the first wave of arrivals looked for alternatives, the most obvious of which was the Christianity of the churches that sponsored them. “When you don’t have a shaman to come and cure your family or conduct the ritual in your household, then you are hopeless,” explained Cziasarh Neng Yang. “You need something to lean on, so the Catholic priest, the church, were the one who rely on, and they come and pray for you, and they serve as the substitute for the shaman.”⁵⁴ Shamans were well aware of the fact that Hmong people in the United States lacked ritual knowledge and turned to Christianity as a “substitute.” Paja Thao, a Hmong man practicing as a shaman in Chicago in the 1980s, observed these changes in his own family:

Now some of my clansmen come to America
None of them knows how to feed these spirits
They do not know these spirits
All my clansmen change to Christians⁵⁵

Hmong Christian pastors observed a similar trend. Joua Tsu Thao, who had been one of the earliest Hmong refugees to arrive and who later pastored a Hmong Baptist congregation in Roseville, observed that many of the people who came to the United States under the first or second category of resettlement became Christian because they did not have enough knowledge and expertise in the correct execution of the Hmong rituals. “[M]ost of the young people who came here on the first or second category, which is most of the people who worked directly to

⁵³ Neng Vang and Paj Ntaub Lis, interview, digital recording at 1:07:00-1:10:00.

⁵⁴ Cziasarh Neng Yang, interview, digital recording at part 11.

⁵⁵ Thao and Conquergood, *I Am a Shaman*, 24.

the United States, we don't know how to worship the old way, and most of the people became Christian," he said.⁵⁶ Timothy Vang, reflecting on his experience as a Hmong pastor, came to the same conclusion:

In the first three years when they arrived, and especially the first group, when the shamans and those people who know how to please the *dab* still lived in Thailand or in Laos, and they came—those who came earlier were those educated people, doctors and nurses, government officials, top military leaders, who had no experience or who had not learned how to do those kinds of chores and shamanism and spiritism. So when they would come to America, they would say, 'Oh, we don't know what to do anymore, even if the person is sick—what do you do? If the person dies, how do you do the funeral for them? So, those who came earlier, they said, 'Oh we have to go to church. That's it. Go to church.' If the sponsor asks, just go to the sponsor's church. And many of them were converted during those first three years when they arrived here, knowing that it would be difficult for them to practice animism, so they accepted Christianity. But later on, when they were able to sponsor their relatives, and when the Hmong people come in bigger numbers, then there were those shamans and those who know how to do that kind of animistic rituals came in great number. Then, those who are interested in for Christianity, the number reduced, significantly. They know that if they are safe, they have funerals or they have weddings, they have someone who knows how to deal with those things. And during that time, the receptive attitude toward Christianity begins to fade.⁵⁷

As Timothy Vang suggested, the first opportunity to reunite with elders often encouraged Hmong refugees who had discontinued observance of their indigenous traditions to revive their practice. The arrival of elders under the third, fourth, and fifth preference categories in the late 1980s and 1990s meant that, as Joua Tsu Thao described it, "a lot of Christian turn[ed] back, go back to the old way of worship[ping] ancestors."⁵⁸ For Cziasarh Neng Yeng, the change came when he was able to leave Ohio and join his parents, who had resettled in the Twin Cities. "We stayed Catholic, I think, until 1980, when we moved from Columbus to Minnesota to reunite

⁵⁶ Joua Tsu Thao, interview, digital recording at part 3.

⁵⁷ Timothy Vang, interview, digital recording at part 8.

⁵⁸ Joua Tsu Thao, interview, digital recording at part 3.

with our parents and with the larger Hmong community,” he explained. “And then we ceased to go to church...I think because we were able to reunite with our folks who can conduct our own rituals and traditions. And so we come back to the culture again.”⁵⁹ Maykao Yang said that her father’s religious affiliation changed when her grandfather arrived. Her father had converted to Christianity after resettling in the United States, but he later ceased attending church; Maykao recalled that he seemed suddenly “ashamed.” “My dad said that it was because my grandpa had come, and because my grandpa did not approve of us practicing the new religion, and he wanted us to go back and practice our traditional religion,” she said. For her part, having spent half her life raised in a Christian household and half in an animist one, she found herself in both worlds. “[Y]ou can say I do both,” she said.⁶⁰

“[I]t bothered the neighbor”

Resettlement policies shaped Hmong religious life in yet a third way: by relocating Hmong refugees to cities. If Hmong refugees had been able to choose where they would live in the United States, many may have opted to reestablish themselves in settings similar to what they had known in Laos: rural areas with mild climates, where large Hmong families could live on farms with enough room to raise crops and livestock. Indeed, many Hmong refugees, eager to resume their lives as farmers, left the site of their initial resettlement and moved to California’s Central Valley as soon as they were able. As a matter of policy, however, resettlement officials

⁵⁹ Cziasarh Neng Yang, interview, digital recording at part 11.

⁶⁰ Maykao Yang, OH 86.10, Oral History Interviews of the Hmong Women's Action Team Oral History Project (Hmoob Thaj Yeeb Oral History Project) 1999-2000, Minnesota Historical Society, transcript, p. 10.

sent Hmong refugees to places where sponsors and resources were available to support them—which was often cities. In an urban environment, the colorful, noisy rituals that were rooted in Hmong agrarian lifestyles were difficult to maintain. As in Thailand, the lack of access to resources such as animals and open space made conducting these ceremonies difficult. Beyond that, moving rituals from outside to indoor spaces—to garages, apartment buildings, hospitals, and American funeral homes, for example—introduced new challenges and sometimes even violated city regulations.⁶¹ Even the weather posed a problem. Wang Kao Her noted that Minnesota’s famously frigid winters made it difficult to practice rituals that were common in Laos. “It is easier to call a spirit through an open door in a warm climate!” he said.⁶²

Hmong rituals sometimes clashed with local regulations on farm animals, which were necessary for a variety of ceremonies that Hmong people had traditionally conducted in the home. Nao Khue Yang and his wife Sarah Fang laughingly recalled how, in the early years, they snuck pigs and chickens into the basements of their apartment buildings. The strictest shamans demanded live pigs, which were then sacrificed at the site of the ritual. Hmong people went to great lengths to fulfill these requirements, traveling to distant farms, transporting livestock in the back of borrowed cars and trucks, chasing down the occasional pig that managed to break free and run loose on highways and city streets, and surreptitiously sacrificing the live animals in basements and garages, without the knowledge of the landlord.⁶³

⁶¹ Lee and Tapp, "Thoughts and Religion," *Culture and Customs of the Hmong*, 2010.

⁶² Organizational Records, Southeast Asian Ministry.

⁶³ Sarah Fang and Nao Khue Yang, interview, digital recording at part 13-14.

Many Hmong refugees, especially those who considered themselves progressive and modern, did not always feel comfortable with these clandestine efforts. Nao Thao described how her husband and father-in-law argued about sneaking a pig into their house:

I remember my father-in-law, one time, he said that he wanted to have...a ritual in the home, so he asked my husband to go buy the pig in the farm. And he said, 'No, I'm not going to. It's not legal.' And my husband and his dad kind of argued on that, so my father-in-law got kind of a little upset, and so he stopped asking my husband. He went on asking the second brother to go get a pig from the farm. So he bought the pig from the farm and brought it to the home. And my husband [said], 'Just to let you know, the police might come, if the neighborhood [hears]. The police might come, so my suggestion [is] you should put it in the garage.' And my father said, 'But this is for the spirit! We need it for the ritual! We need the pig in the home!' So he [was just] quiet. He didn't say anything. So they brought the pig in....After they did the ritual through, the first part, then they took the pig to the garage and butchered [it in] the garage. And my husband felt very uncomfortable...He didn't say much because he was the son and the dad was the one...who had the power.⁶⁴

Nao Thao and her husband were both young and forward-looking people who aspired to be respectable, rule-abiding Americans. At the same time, however, they were operating in a traditional family hierarchy that placed high value on honoring the wishes of elders and maintaining harmonious relations with family members and spirits.

Hmong refugees hoped to maintain harmonious relations with their American neighbors, too, which was not always an easy task. Concerns about offending American customs and tastes made some Hmong refugees nervous about practicing rituals in their own homes. Smoke from burning incense and paper money alarmed the neighbors, whose 9-1-1 calls caused fire fighters to pay unexpected visits to Hmong homes where families were conducting rituals.⁶⁵ These ceremonies, which involved hand bells and drums and singing, were also loud. "The early '80s

⁶⁴ Nao Thao, interview, digital recording at part 15.

⁶⁵ Sarah Fang and Nao Khue Yang, interview, digital recording at part 11-12.

wasn't easy because of the drumming, the chanting, and the noise, and it bothered the neighbor," said Nao Thao. Fortunately for her family, their first home was a second-floor apartment located directly above an office. "During the daytime, the people kind of worked in the office," she explained. "But at the nighttime, they were all gone. So we didn't have issues for doing the chanting, the shaman ritual, in the evening."⁶⁶ Most Hmong refugees, however, had to deal with neighbors' disapproval at one point or another and learned to head off these complaints by explaining the importance of rituals to their neighbors and by notifying them of any upcoming ceremonies.⁶⁷ Over time, both Hmong refugees and their neighbors learned to develop a sense of humor about their cultural differences. "We have some issue with the butcher shop in Hugo, [Minnesota], where the neighbors complain that the Hmong who butcher the pig over there makes the neighbor[hood] smell bad," said Cziasarh Yang. "One of my American friends responded to the complaint with the joke, "'But to God, it smells good!'"⁶⁸

In certain situations, however, it was not only difficult, but also dangerous, to carry out Hmong ceremonies in secret. Healing rituals were hard to conduct in American hospitals, where regulations about the presence of live animals, incense, and shamans were considerably stricter. "[T]he old beliefs and traditions call for sacrifices, and the sacrifice must be done close to the sick person," said Wang Kao Her. "For example, if a pig is to be sacrificed, a rope tied to the pig is held by the hand of the sick person...Also, burning incense and special 'gold paper money' must be done by the shaman in front of the altar inside the house. These things can't be done in hospitals or American homes. It would disturb those who are not Hmong and also, with oxygen

⁶⁶ Nao Thao, interview, digital recording at part 14.

⁶⁷ Sarah Fang and Nao Khue Yang, interview, digital recording at part 12.

⁶⁸ Cziasarh Neng Yang, interview, digital recording at part 12.

in the hospital room, it is not allowed.”⁶⁹ Maintaining funeral traditions was also onerous. Traditionally, funerals lasted between three and ten days, during which time drummers, ritual chanters, and *qeej* players assisted the soul in its journey to its spiritual home, while family members gathered and feasted around the clock. American funeral homes, open for only eight hours each day, did not readily accommodate these crowded, noisy ceremonies. Conducting funerals in these circumstances was very stressful, as Hmong family members, charged with the task of leading the spirit of the dead person to the ancestral home, did not want to rush the proceedings, for fear that skipping a step or making a mistake would result in the spirit of the dead returning to trouble the living.⁷⁰

“Just ignoring or pretending that nothing exists”

Another way in which refugee resettlement policies introduced challenges Hmong efforts to maintain their indigenous traditions was by arranging for Christian churches to sponsor Hmong refugees. Some Hmong refugees felt that it was inappropriate for them to maintain their traditions if Christians sponsored them, and they found it difficult to speak honestly and openly about their desire to maintain their religious and cultural traditions. For one, language barriers hindered communication, and the delicate issue of religion and the accommodation of Hmong traditions was simply not discussed. According to Houa Vue Moua, the silence on the issue was

⁶⁹ Southeast Asian Ministry Records. For a full discussion of the practice of Hmong healing rituals and Western medicine, see Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall down*; Biloine Young, *My Heart It Is Delicious: Setting the Course for Cross-Cultural Health Care* (Afton: Afton Historical Society Press, 2007).

⁷⁰ Sarah Fang and Nao Khue Yang, interview, digital recording at part 10.

mutual. “One, they [the church sponsors] never happened to ask,” she said. “Two, we never happened to share. It [was] just ignoring or pretending that nothing exists.”⁷¹ Receiving such generous help caused some Hmong refugees to feel uncomfortable about pursuing a religious tradition that was clearly different, and perhaps offensive, to their sponsors.

This discomfort and silence characterized refugee-sponsor relationships even if the religious differences were relatively small. Timothy Vang’s family was Protestant when they arrived in the United States. A member of the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church, he had begun to preach even as an adolescent in Laos and Thailand. When he was resettled in the United States, a Catholic parish in Wisconsin sponsored him and, from his first days in the United States, brought him to Mass every Sunday, right away—“the next week after we arrived,” he said. He and his family continued to attend Catholic Mass for two years before he finally confessed to his sponsor that they were, in fact, Catholic, but devoted members of the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church. “And our sponsor was very gracious,” he recalled. “She said, ‘No problem!’” She encouraged them to attend a church from their own denomination on Sundays. When asked why it took so long for him to talk about this issue, Timothy Vang said with a laugh, “In fact, I don’t remember that the sponsors ever asked anything about that.”⁷² For people like Timothy Vang, attending a church service of a different denomination was not very onerous, and Hmong Christians did not raise the issue of religious difference. “No, we never really thought about saying anything like that [about their religious differences] because it was the same Bible, it was just different ways of doing things in the church,” said Shong Yang, who is Protestant but who attended Catholic Mass when his Catholic sponsors brought him.

⁷¹ Houa Vue Moua and Yong Kaye Moua, interview, digital recording at part 18-19.

⁷² Timothy Vang, interview, digital recording at part 3.

Sometimes, Hmong refugees discussed the religious differences they had with their sponsors. PaMang Her, a Hmong Baptist minister, recalled a conversation that he had with the Presbyterian pastor of the church that sponsored him. “I saw him baptizing babies, sprinkling them with water, and he smoked cigars,” he said. He was curious and also critical of Presbyterian practices. “I sat down with him and told him that I disagreed with him and I knew that he loved me very much,” he said. “I could not accept how he baptized the babies by sprinkling water. I just can't do that. I won't.” PaMang Her explained to the pastor that he did not believe that baptism was either salvation or symbolic. “So he told me that I was a Baptist and sent me to a Baptist church,” PaMang Her said. “He and I are still very good friends after that.”⁷³ Perhaps more frequently, however, sponsors never asked Hmong refugees if they were Christian or what their religious preferences were, even if sponsors brought them to church. Some Hmong refugees recalled that their sponsors did not discuss religion at all.

Other Hmong refugees who came from an animist background were particularly frustrated with the fact that the congregational sponsors brought them to church without asking about their religious preferences, as Tzianeng Vang’s experience with being sponsored by a Methodist church in Missouri reveals. When asked if told his sponsors that he and his family were animist, he replied, “No, because we were never asked.” He continued:

It’s typical, I guess. When you are only one family, you already received so much help from them. I guess they just kind of took the liberty of thinking, ‘Okay, I think they probably like what they have, so we’re just going to continue to impose or help the best we can.’ So, nobody never asked...and even if they did, we would not have understood what they said anyway. Nobody actually sat down and said, we sponsored you but we still want you to have the religion, religious freedom of choosing whether you will remain animist—Hmong animist—or you want to convert to Christianity based on the Methodist philosophy.

⁷³ PaMang Her, interview, transcript.

Tzianeng Vang’s experience involved precisely what many sponsoring churches explicitly hoped to avoid: refugees adopting Christianity because they felt obligated or pressured to do so by sponsoring churches. His story suggests that, even if church volunteers had good intentions, the people whom they served may have still interpreted their actions differently.⁷⁴

Part of the problem was that Hmong refugees often lacked the language to speak clearly about what they believed. Paj Ntaub Lis recalled how, as a child, she functioned as “the communicator” between her family and her sponsors, but stumbled when it came to discussing the indigenous Hmong religion of her family. Either because the family that sponsored them was “upper-class” or because they were Christian, she struggled to talk openly about Hmong animism, and it took “a long time to be okay with talking” about their traditions. Part of the problem was that she lacked the vocabulary to do so. “[I]t took us a long time before I was able to find the correct words in English to tell them what we believed in,” she said. The sponsoring family, for their part, also seemed to be reluctant to discuss the issue of religion in the first place. “[T]hey never asked us what we believed in,” she said. Later, as a young woman who continued to cherish a relationship with her sponsors, who over the years became close family friends, she began to speak openly about her family’s rituals. As an adult, she had been called to become a shaman, and she wanted to share her journey with her Lutheran sponsors.⁷⁵

Indigenous Hmong religion did not constitute an institutionalized and recognizable religion, and as a result, Hmong refugees faced greater challenges in discussing their indigenous traditions compared to the Buddhist Lao, Cambodian, and Vietnamese refugees who were

⁷⁴ Tzianeng Vang, interview, digital recording at part 9.

⁷⁵ Neng Vang and Paj Ntaub Lis, interview, digital recording at 1:04:00-1:08:00.

resettled at the same time. Committed to respecting religious differences, many Catholic and Lutheran churches encouraged refugees to continue to practice their native religions.⁷⁶ Hmong refugees, however, did not worship in temples or in any distinctive sacred space; their traditions did not have any formal hierarchical structures or even a name that was familiar to most Americans. Some refugees found that their sponsors were aware of Hmong traditions and supportive of those who desired to practice them. “The Americans knew about our ways and they found places for us to buy animals for our religious ceremonies,” said Xai Thao, who arrived. “Overall, the Americans were very considerate. They would not allow us to perform our religious ceremonies in the house but we were provided with a place to perform them.”⁷⁷ Xai Thao’s experience, however, appears to have been unique. More Hmong refugees were like Houa Vue Moua and her church sponsors, who preferred not to raise the issue of indigenous Hmong religion at all.

Most Hmong refugees did not consider the practice of their indigenous traditions in the United States to be something to which they were entitled. For Cziasarh Neng Yang, the realization that he was free to practice traditional Hmong rituals in the United States came when he learned about Roger Williams and Anne Hutchison as a high school student. Looking back, he emphasized how little Hmong people understood their freedoms when they first arrived. “We

⁷⁶ Mark Franken, interview, transcript, p. 11; “Refugees from Indochina,” 1975 Congressional Oversight Hearing.

⁷⁷ Xai Thao, interview by Mai Neng Vang, translated by Peter Chou Vang, Hmong Oral History Project, Concordia University, transcript, accessed January 18, 2014, http://homepages.csp.edu/hillmer/Interviews/Xai_Thao.html.

did not know the Constitution,” he said. “We did not know that there’s an amendment that allows people to believe what they believe and do what they do. We did not know that.”⁷⁸

Refugee resettlement policies changed the trajectory of Hmong religious life. In various, unanticipated ways, resettlement policies disrupted the practice and preservation of indigenous Hmong religion. As will be discussed later, these conditions produced a religious void and a sense of spiritual vulnerability that many Hmong refugees addressed through the adoption of Christianity—a religious choice that was also facilitated by a resettlement system that depended on congregational sponsorship. In a land with “the most freedom,” Hmong refugees were not always free to practice their chosen traditions and to determine the destinies of their own souls. In time, Hmong people adapted and preserved their indigenous religion through innovative means. However, in the tumultuous early years of resettlement, they understood that the structure of the religious landscape did not favor them in the United States, or even offer them equal footing. Paja Thao, the shaman, chanted of both his despair and determination:

I still believe Hmong religion
In my country Laos none of my cousins changed to Christians
But now all my cousins come to America
And all of them change to Christians

Now only my son and I
Hold to Hmong religion
But I am not sure how much longer
Before my son changes to Christian

As for me, I will never be Christian
Because my father and mother gave birth to me
I am not the only one
There are many from every clan
Who still believe Hmong religion

⁷⁸ Cziasarh Neng Yang, interview, digital recording at part 11.

I shall never forget my own culture
I am a Hmong⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Thao and Conquergood, *I Am a Shaman*, 18–19.

Chapter Four:
Refugee Resettlement as Christian Ministry and Mission

The airlift that inspired Kathleen Vellenga to action in the spring of 1975 rescued over one hundred thousand Vietnamese people and delivered them, by helicopter and plane, to staging areas in the Pacific and eventually to temporary refugee camps in the United States. At one of these camps—Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, located fifty miles north of San Diego—Maryann Lund, a pastor's wife and a volunteer with Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, had reported for duty. If other Americans before her had arrived at Camp Pendleton ready to serve their country with their guns and their tanks, she arrived ready to serve her God, not with weapons, but with kindness and compassion for the war-weary refugees disembarking the planes. In the Lutheran agency's national newsletter, she described the work of resettlement with the exhilaration of one who had just experienced a religious awakening. At Camp Pendleton, she explained, she and her husband "saw the face of Christ." "What does Christ look like?" she asked. In their daily work of feeding the hungry and comforting the grief-stricken, the Lunds had discovered that Christ looked a refugee.

Quoting from scripture, Maryann Lund described the Biblical basis for refugee work. "I was hungry and you gave me food, naked and you clothed me": she discussed the daily work of serving meals and washing the clothing of refugees, many of whom wore oversized military jackets loaned to them. "I was in prison": she recounted the prison-like condition of Camp Pendleton, where a field of tents housed "huddled masses yearning to be free." "I was a stranger, and you took me in": she wrote of the gratitude of refugees who were sponsored and resettled by Lutheran congregations across the country. Her hope was that her story would encourage other

Lutherans to contribute their gifts to the resettlement effort. “You, my dear friends, hold the key to this ‘prison’; you are the ones who can minister to these ‘Christs’ through our love and assistance,” she wrote.¹

If Maryann Lund believed that the airplanes arriving at Camp Pendleton were carrying “Christs” from overseas, Pearl Jones also saw the appearance of Southeast Asian refugee as a divinely ordained special delivery. From the time she was a little girl attending Sunday School at her Southern Baptist church, Pearl Jones had hoped to become a foreign missionary.² For a while, it seemed that God had different plans for her. But years later, as a member of Roseville Baptist Church in Roseville, Minnesota, God delivered a missionary project directly to her in 1981. It was a Hmong man who called the church, out of the blue, searching for a congregation to help him sponsor his cousin and her two daughters from Thailand. At the time, Pearl Jones was working as a church secretary, and she was the one who picked up the telephone. Though she had never met a Hmong person before, she was enthusiastic to help the man—as she put it, “because he was going to live in Saint Paul and because God had always said [to me], ‘That’s where I want you to work.’”³ She urged the pastor, “Let’s go for it!” In her heart, she felt that the situation was truly providential. It was exactly the mission project that she knew God was calling her to do.⁴ Thirty years later, looking back on that fateful day, she confessed, “I never

¹ Maryann Lund, “What Does Christ Look Like?” *LIRS Bulletin*, Standing Committee, Protocol, Minutes, January 8-9, 1976, LCUSA DIRS 10/1, ELCA Archive.

² Pearl Jones, interview by the author, August 29, 2012, White Bear Lake, Minnesota, digital recording at part 8. Name has been changed at the request of the interview narrator.

³ *Ibid.*, digital recording at part 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, digital recording at part 13.

thought that God would pick up a whole people and move them to our country so we could do missions with them.”⁵

For church volunteers like Maryann Lund and Pearl Jones who were on the front lines of refugee resettlement, caring for refugees was a ministry, a mission, and a religious practice animated by Christian commitment. The religious meanings of refugee work mobilized a nationwide corps of church volunteers, but it also muddled tidy divisions between church and state and gave rise to real-life dilemmas about how to negotiate the practice of Christian missionary service with the practice of religious pluralism and accommodation.

“Our teachings tell us that we must be about welcoming people from other lands”

In recruiting congregations to serve as sponsors, voluntary agencies stressed the religious significance of resettlement work. According to one Church World Service flyer, congregations were “avenues of God’s love to refugees,” and sponsorship was an act of Christian love not only for the hungry and the homeless, but for Jesus himself:

Refugees coming to the U.S. arrive here with very little to help get them get started. Churches can help in the difficult process of beginning over again in a new land, such as finding an apartment and getting a job. Churches can also provide help by extending their community to include refugees in the fellowship of the human family. Jesus, Who was Himself a refugee, said that by helping refugees we are really helping Him. Will your church consider reaching out and helping a refugee begin a new life? In a camp many miles away, someone is waiting to hear from you.⁶

⁵ Ibid., digital recording at part 8.

⁶ Folder 35, Box 2, The Refugee Studies Center, University of Minnesota Records, General/Multiethnic Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

Literature circulating among Presbyterian churches also emphasized that Jesus was a refugee. “When Jesus was a child, his parents fled with him from their native land to escape the tyranny of Herod’s rule,” read one brochure. “Exiled in Egypt until the death of the king, he experienced the same long journeys, hunger and sufferings that millions of people now endure.”⁷ Across denominations, Christian churches and voluntary agencies urged congregations to remember that, as the Episcopal Migration Ministries put it, “[w]elcoming strangers is a response to our Christian imperative to care for those in need.”⁸ And, almost universally, voluntary agencies described refugee resettlement as a ministry. One Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service pamphlet called resettlement “a face-to-face ministry.”⁹ Church World Service literature used similar language: “Refugee resettlement offers a new life and a helping hand to a person or family from a refugee camp overseas. For Christians, refugee resettlement provides a unique chance to participate in the healing ministry Christ calls us to be a part of.”¹⁰

Sponsorship appeals that emphasized refugee assistance as a religious obligation also drew connections with church teachings on the wars in Southeast Asia. The *Catholic Bulletin*, the newspaper for the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis, featured a column by Bernard Casserly, who urged Americans to support refugee resettlement efforts, which offered redemption for the nation’s wartime sins. “It may sound improbable at first that sponsoring a

⁷ “Lord, When did We See You,” Presbyterian Church of the U.S.A., Church World Service Records, Presbyterian Historical Society.

⁸ Pamphlets Relating to Refugee Relief and Assistance in Minnesota and the United States, Minnesota Historical Society Pamphlet Collection, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁹ Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., Dept. of Immigration and Refugee Service, Record Group 10/3, Evangelical Church in America Archive.

¹⁰ Pamphlets Relating to Refugee Relief and Assistance in Minnesota and the United States, Minnesota Historical Society Pamphlet Collection, Minnesota Historical Society.

refugee will earn you God's forgiveness," argued Joseph Aurele-Plourde. "But we do have some sins to be forgiven as a nation. We ought to help the refugees now so we'll have the forgiveness of God to help us through troubles we may have in the future."¹¹ Sponsoring Southeast Asian refugees, in other words, was an opportunity for Americans to perform acts of public penance and to seek redemption and absolution for its years of waging war.

How did congregations respond to this appeal? In her study of congregational sponsorship in Riverside County, California, between 1979 and 1981, Helen Fein found that the Biblical basis for refugee service, as well as the secular humanitarian value of resettlement service, effectively mobilized a corps of Christian volunteers to action. The people who led and organized sponsorship efforts discussed how their refugee service arose from their empathy and their understanding that "what it means to be a Christian, a good Christian" required "active responsibility to people in need in this world." One woman declared that refugee work was an expression of her commitment "to follow the Golden Rule" and "to be toward others what I should want somebody to be towards me." Another resettlement volunteer said that refugee work was about "loving your neighbor," while yet another said that "a good Christian always tries to upbuild anyone he comes into contact with."¹² Fein also found that volunteers believed that, by serving refugees, they were following the example of Jesus Christ. One volunteer explained that refugee work was a chance "to reflect the Gospel of Jesus Christ in our lives"; another person believed that resettlement was a chance "to try to follow the ways of Christ" and "to be Christ-like" and "what our Lord wants us to be." Fein noted that, for many of the people involved in

¹¹ Bernard Casserly, "Welcome 'Boat People,'" *Catholic Bulletin*, July 6, 1979.

¹² Fein, *Congregational Sponsors of Indochinese Refugees in the United States, 1979-1981*, 65.

resettlement ministry, being a good Christian centered more on action and practice, rather than on belief and doctrine. “What is striking is that none attributed any importance to religious dogma, churchgoing, or ritual adherence as criteria or signs of being a good Christian,” Fein observed. “It is being and giving, rather than belief and formal participation that counts most to them.”¹³

Congruent with Fein’s observations in California, religious commitment galvanized congregations in Minnesota, too. A close examination of the individuals at the center of church-based refugee ministries in the Twin Cities indicates that, across denominations, Christian volunteers imbued refugee resettlement with religious meaning. For these individuals, refugee resettlement was their local response to the hurt that they witnessed in the world, an active acceptance of the call to live and serve as Christians, and a lived articulation of Biblical principles and Christian teachings.

For many volunteers, participation in resettlement work developed out of a broad, longstanding commitment to serving society’s most vulnerable. This Christian concern shaped the full trajectory of their personal and professional lives, and many dedicated resettlement workers arrived at refugee work after fulfilling careers in helping professions such as education, social work, and humanitarian missions. When television nightly news broadcasted the plight of refugees and the dire need for sponsors, these people redirected their energy. For example, Rosemary Schuneman, a School Sister of Notre Dame, spent many years teaching women and children. She was a member of a teaching and missionary order of vowed Catholic women with a

¹³ Ibid., 66. Fein’s description of congregational sponsors’ compassion and attentiveness to the needy resembles those whom Nancy Ammerman has described as “Golden Rule” Christians: people whose religious lives centered on “right living” as much as, and perhaps more than, “right believing.” See Ammerman, “Golden Rule Christianity: Lived Religion in the American Mainstream,” 197.

long-standing commitment to education, especially for immigrants.¹⁴ When Southeast Asian refugees began to arrive in Frogtown, her native neighborhood in Saint Paul, she changed course, shifted to teaching English to adult immigrants and refugees, and eventually launched her own adult school, the Notre Dame ESL School, which she ran for eleven years.¹⁵

Institutions also transformed themselves in response to the refugee crisis. At two Catholic parishes in the Twin Cities, Immaculate Heart of Mary and St. Joseph, the congregational sponsorship committees had originated as groups founded in the 1960s to support orphans, missionaries, and the homebound elderly. Named “Matthew 25” groups after the chapter in the Bible that teaches about Christian works of mercy, these committees served as the nucleus for church sponsorship efforts when, in 1975, parishes began to mobilize to resettle refugee families from Vietnam. As the *Catholic Bulletin* reported, the Matthew 25 verse “Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers, that you do unto Me,” was the motto of these parish resettlement committees.¹⁶

Matthew 25 lists several acts of Christian kindness and charity—including feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and offering shelter to the weary—that also happened to be the essential components of refugee resettlement. General principles to “love thy neighbor” and to serve “the least of my brothers” stirred many volunteers to action. Christian resettlement workers, however, approached refugee care from diverse cultural backgrounds, theological

¹⁴ Rosemary Schuneman, interview by the author, August 31, 2012, Saint Paul, Minnesota, digital recording at part 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, digital recording at part 4.

¹⁶ Jeanne Luxem, “Gospel Verse Puts Parishes into Action.”

frameworks, political values, and personal experiences and caused some volunteers to cite more specific reasons, many of them Biblical, for their refugee service.

For one, Christian volunteers often described their commitment to resettlement as arising from their commitment to be peacemakers in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Joanne Karvonen, a member of the Refugee Core Committee at Saint Anthony Park Lutheran Church, fervently opposed the war in Vietnam. In time, the war came home to Saint Paul in the form of Southeast Asian refugees, and she connected her efforts to aid Hmong war victims to her established anti-war convictions. “We had all been—or at least I—was horrified at the Vietnam War and the effect that that had on that country, and so getting involved with the refugee program here was one little thing that I could do, since my letters to the President or Congress hadn’t done too much,” she said. “Helping individuals directly was something that I wanted to do.”¹⁷ Other church volunteers felt that they owed Hmong refugees their help, as recompense for all that Hmong people had suffered for the United States during the war and for all the destruction that the United States had caused in Asia. Dorothy Knight, a volunteer at Central Presbyterian Church, pointed out that “a lot of churches realized that this was a group of people that certainly deserved to be here and deserved help in the process of making the adjustment.”¹⁸ Reflecting on Catholic resettlement efforts across the nation, Mark Franken observed that parishioners saw resettlement as “something tangible they can do” as they witnessed a war and a global refugee crisis of tragic proportions.¹⁹

¹⁷ Joanne Karvonen, interview by the author, August 10, 2012, Saint Paul, Minnesota, digital recording at part 2.

¹⁸ Dorothy Knight, interview by the author, August 6, 2012, Saint Paul, Minnesota, digital recording at part 5.

¹⁹ Mark Franken, interview, transcript, p. 6.

Christian volunteers often described their commitment to resettlement as grounded in the Biblical imperative to welcome the stranger and to aid people seeking refuge. Across denominations, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me”—Matthew 25:35—was a common refrain for congregational volunteers, who spoke of their care for refugees as a ministry of welcoming. “Welcoming was probably the biggest motivation,” said Dorothy Knight.²⁰ In Mark Franken’s view, the work of welcoming others “a core responsibility.” “[O]ur teachings tell us that we *must* be about welcoming people from other lands,” he said.²¹ Similarly, Rosemary Schuneman, citing Mark 9:37, saw the act of welcoming strangers as an act of welcoming Jesus and following Christ’s example.²²

Christian resettlement volunteers welcomed the stranger not simply because Christian teachings urged them to do so, but because they knew that their own predecessors at one point had been strangers, too. Caring for refugees thus reflected Christian values as well as American values, and the religious obligation to open their doors to the weary and downtrodden converged with a secular commitment to honor the United States as a nation of refuge. Dorothy Knight explained that she sympathized with refugees because her own relatives were from Norway. “I’m not that far from immigrant roots myself!” she said.²³ Also the descendent of Norwegian immigrants—people who “had come as economic refugees,” she said—Joanne Karvonen

²⁰ Dorothy Knight, interview, digital recording at part 13.

²¹ Mark Franken, interview, transcript, p. 8.

²² Rosemary Schuneman, interview, digital recording at part 16.

²³ Dorothy Knight, interview, digital recording at part 6.

harbored a deep fascination in “the romance of immigration” since childhood.²⁴ Her interest was so strong, in fact, that she began work with the Refugee Core Committee even before she and her husband were official members of the congregation.²⁵ For both of these women, a concern for immigrants and refugees developed out of an appreciation for their own family histories, but also a reverence for the United States, a nation that they celebrated as a safehaven for freedom-seeking people. As Mark Franken put it, “our history, our roots, our heritage is in that refugee experience: we were founded by refugees fleeing religious persecution. We’ve got to get back and remind ourselves that our strength in the intervening two hundred-some years—our *strength*—lies in that immigrant experience.”²⁶

Refugee resettlement also expressed an aspiration of many Christian volunteers to live and serve as good community members. For Dorothy Knight, refugee resettlement could be summed up in one Biblical principle: “Love thy neighbor.”²⁷ Her church, Central Presbyterian Church of Saint Paul, described its refugee ministry as an endeavor to show hospitality to new Hmong neighbors in Saint Paul. “It was made known to us that this was a family that was in our neighborhood, and they were interested in meeting someone to connect with them in the community,” she said.²⁸

For many of these volunteers, the challenge to love their neighbors was also a challenge to respond to the churches’ changing neighborhood. Dianne Anderson had grown up on the East

²⁴ Joanne Karvonen, interview, digital recording at part 1.

²⁵ Ibid., digital recording at part 2.

²⁶ Mark Franken, interview, transcript, p. 7.

²⁷ Dorothy Knight, interview, digital recording at part 13

²⁸ Ibid., digital recording at part 6.

Side of Saint Paul, in the Dayton's Bluff neighborhood surrounding First Lutheran Church, of which she was a member. First Lutheran Church was proud to be "an inner city church" and had resisted calls to move to the suburbs in the mid-1960s. Dedicated to "serving and being a welcoming place for our neighbors and those in need," particularly in Dayton's Bluff and the East Side of Saint Paul, she and the other members of the First Lutheran congregation have committed to adapting to the changing demographics of the city and the neighborhood, where Hmong refugees were moving into homes previously inhabited by Swedish, Norwegian, and German immigrants.²⁹ "Where does First Church go?" Anderson recalled the members of the church asking each other amid these transformations. "We are in this neighborhood. We are seeing changes in this neighborhood, and what does God want us to do in this place?" The church, she said, had "welcoming our neighbors" as one its "key statements." Reflecting on this mission, she chose to volunteer her time with Southeast Asian Ministry, a project of the ELCA Synod of Saint Paul, and helped to start a program to support Hmong elders.³⁰ Her decision to volunteer with Southeast Asian Ministry reflected the commitment by the church to adapt its ministries to be more responsive to the changing needs of the surrounding community. "It's changed the look of our congregation, which is wonderful—to see that it's working," she said, explaining that, because of the new programs, the people in the church have become more diverse. "So, I think, as scary and fearful as we could be of this, we still want to do it and see that it is where we belong and what we should be doing."³¹

²⁹ Dianne Anderson, interview by the author, September 19, 2012, Saint Paul, Minnesota, digital recording at part 1.

³⁰ Ibid., digital recording at part 3.

Most fundamentally, refugee resettlement was a ministry of love and concern for the poor. For Joanne Karvonen, refugee resettlement involved “following the example of Jesus Christ in working with the poor and working with children and working with the downtrodden.”³² Mary Mergenthal’s motivations were similar, though she cited another passage from scripture: “As you do to the least of these, you do it unto me.”³³ Rosemary Schuneman, meanwhile, saw the work of teaching English to immigrants and refugees as an expression of her aspirations of seeking solidarity with the poor and “living the Eucharist” as a woman religious:

When I go every Sunday to church, I’m very aware that at the Eucharist, all are welcome. We say all are welcome. And we take a look at the different people in the church. We are all very different. But there’s one center: it’s Jesus. If you say you’re a follower of Jesus, you have to do what Jesus did. And who did he hang around with? He hung around with the poor, the sick, the prostitutes. And who did he have hard words for? They were people in the church, the Pharisees, the Sadducees. And it’s very important for me to go back to how He lived...The night before He died, He says, ‘Do this in remembrance of me.’ That means me, too. I’m not a man. I’m not a priest. At this point, in our church, only a man can be a priest. But I follow Jesus the way a woman would follow because I’ve been gifted with many beautiful skills and gifts, and I need to use them because God gave them to me. And He doesn’t give gifts just to sit there. You gotta use them. And so it’s very important for me, when Jesus says, ‘Do this in remembrance of me,’ that at the Eucharist, I’m aware that I am blessed. He blessed the bread first. I am blessed. I am broken. He broke that bread, and He gave it to His apostles that night. He wants us to do the same. So, we need to remember, and I need to remember, everybody is blessed, is broken, and as part of our day, whatever we do, we give ourselves to people, and that’s what a follower of Christ is. And that is one of our goals as sisters, to be aware of the Eucharist and how we do that,

³¹ Dianne Anderson, interview, digital recording at part 9. The changing demographics of the neighborhood may be one reason why some urban churches have been able to stay afloat. Pointing to the example of Puerto Rican and Cuban Catholics who moved to Boston in the 1960s, Peggy Levitt has argued that recently arrived immigrants filled urban churches left nearly abandoned because of white flight. See Peggy Levitt, *The Transnational Villagers* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 168.

³² Joanne Karvonen, interview, digital recording at part 5.

³³ Mary Mergenthal, interview by the author, August 10, 2012, Saint Paul, Minnesota, digital recording at part 8.

maybe by listening to the prisoners, listening to my student's story...To listen, to be present, and to share.³⁴

Resettling refugees was a form of Biblically inspired “lived religion” and a “ministry,” a religious practice to which they were, and continue to be, deeply committed. Three decades later, long past the era when Southeast Asian refugees dominated the evening news, Joanne Karvonen and Mary Mergenthal continued to contribute to the Refugee Core Committee. Pearl Jones continued to maintain close friendships with the Hmong women who attended her sewing classes and Bible studies. Rosemary Schuneman, despite battles with cancer, continued to teach English. For all of these women, the work of welcoming refugees reached far beyond finding jobs and homes; it was a practice of heartfelt hospitality, a service imbued with significant moral meaning, and an expression of their lifelong commitment to putting their Christian beliefs into action. For these volunteers, serving “the least of these” was the meaning of a good life and a deep faith.

“This was mission right here”

If resettlement volunteers understood refugee resettlement as a ministry, many volunteers also conceptualized it as a mission motivated by volunteers’ faithfulness to the Great Commission—the call by Jesus in Matthew 28 to “make disciples of all nations.”

Refugee resettlement, in general, attracted people with backgrounds in missionary work. Pearl Jones grew up in a Southern Baptist church that trained her to do missionary work since she was a young child. Before relocating to Minnesota, she had worked with a missionary project

³⁴ Rosemary Schuneman, interview, digital recording at part 15.

in Chattanooga and hoped to continue her missionary work at Roseville Baptist Church, which she admired for being a “missions-minded church.”³⁵ Rosemary Schuneman started her English school for refugees in Saint Paul after working as a missionary teacher for women in Africa.³⁶ Kathleen Vellenga, the coordinator of the first effort to resettle a Hmong family in Minnesota, was the daughter of a minister who frequently opened his home to international visitors, including globe-trotting teachers and students affiliated with the local Christian college.³⁷ And Paul Tidemann, the pastor of Saint Paul-Reformation Lutheran Church, served as a missionary in a wide range of settings, from inner-city Chicago to Guyana, before settling in Saint Paul and leading an actively integrationist congregation.³⁸

Refugee resettlement also engaged globally oriented Christians intrigued by intercultural encounters. Dorothy Knight, for instance, was the daughter of a Lutheran minister whose family’s travels exposed her to Ukrainian immigrants in North Dakota, Native Americans in Wisconsin, European displaced persons resettled in New York City after World War II, and Chinese foreign students in Minnesota. She later chose to become a social studies teacher because, for her, “to get to know people of different cultures and different nationalities certainly was just kind of natural.”³⁹ Refugee resettlement offered her an opportunity to satisfy her fascination with the world’s peoples.

³⁵ Pearl Jones, interview, digital recording at part 9.

³⁶ Rosemary Schuneman, interview, digital recording at part 1, 3.

³⁷ Kathleen Vellenga, interview, digital recording at 0:00-5:55.

³⁸ Paul Tidemann, interview by the author, July 28, 2012, Saint Paul, Minnesota, digital recording at part 1, 4, 6.

³⁹ Dorothy Knight, interview, digital recording at part 10.

If refugee resettlement attracted individuals inclined to international missionary work, it appealed to congregations animated by the same priorities. Churches that volunteered to sponsor refugees often had a congregational culture oriented toward global missions. Pearl Jones, for example, described her church, Roseville Baptist Church, as a community of true “soul-winners” who “want people to come to the Lord and to know the truth.”⁴⁰ Mary Mergenthal of Saint Anthony Park Lutheran Church attributed her congregation’s active support for work to its “missionary sensitivity” and its proximity to Luther Seminary, which brought over 250 missionaries to the Saint Anthony Park neighborhood and church throughout the twentieth century.⁴¹ In 1978, the opportunity to sponsor a Hmong family “was suddenly mission on our doorstep,” she recalled. Missions-minded congregation members “gave incredibly generously” because, as Mary Mergenthal put it, “they could see this was mission right here” and “they all took the call of to make disciples of all nations incredibly seriously.”⁴² After the first sponsorship project in 1978, Saint Anthony Park Lutheran Church continued on to have an active refugee sponsorship program that spanned four decades and that resettled families from Laos, Vietnam, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Hungary, Somalia, Haiti, Cuba, Croatia, Bosnia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Bhutan.⁴³

In addition, refugee resettlement appealed to congregations that were already involved in domestic missionary projects. At Saint Paul-Reformation Lutheran Church, for example,

⁴⁰ Pearl Jones, interview, digital recording at part 10.

⁴¹ *A Brief History of St. Anthony Park Lutheran Church*, St. Anthony Park Lutheran Church Records, Luther Seminary Archive.

⁴² Mary Mergenthal, interview, digital recording at part 9.

⁴³ *A Brief History of St. Anthony Park Lutheran Church*, St. Anthony Park Lutheran Church Files, Luther Seminary Archives.

congregation members understood their efforts to welcome and serve one Hmong family as similar to their urban missionary efforts a decade earlier. In the eyes of many congregation members, teaching the Lee family English in the church basement was “parallel to the decision a decade before to do tutoring with Black children” in urban Saint Paul neighborhood.⁴⁴

Finally, refugee work aligned with the objectives of congregations that actively supported global humanitarian work. The Colonial Church of Edina, for example, aspired to be “a world church,” one that was “more intimate and international” and “more service-oriented and more spiritual.” In 1979, the year that the church’s senior minister articulated this vision, Colonial Church supported at least five refugee families. By the end of the following year, the church had sponsored a total of 32 Southeast Asian refugees. By 1984, well past the point when enthusiasm for resettlement waned in many congregations, Colonial Church continued to commit to sponsoring two families each year, on top of continuing to help the 56 it had already sponsored. The church also donated several thousand dollars every year to World Vision to support refugee and anti-hunger projects around the world. In a single year, the congregation participated in efforts to raise \$250,000 to assist 76,000 refugees in Africa and sent \$16,500 in the first installment drawn from the Thanksgiving offering alone.⁴⁵

There were sometimes very direct connections between foreign missionaries working in Asia and resettlement volunteers sponsoring Southeast Asian refugees in the United States. The sponsorship committee at Saint Anthony Park Lutheran Church, for instance, discovered that a Catholic priest serving in Saint Paul had been posted previously in Southeast Asia and had

⁴⁴ Paul Tidemann, “The Process of Trans-Cultural Change: One Congregation’s Story,” Saint Paul-Reformation Lutheran Church Records, Luther Seminary Archive.

⁴⁵ Colonial Church of Edina, Congregational Records, Minnesota Historical Society.

ministered to two of the Hmong refugees sponsored by their own church. The priest had actually “eaten with them in their hut in Thailand,” reported a member of the church’s Refugee Core Committee.⁴⁶ Even more direct was the experience of Helen and Malcolm Sawyer, who, after working as missionaries with the Hmong in Laos for several decades, returned to the United States in the 1970s and continued to work with the Hmong, this time in a resettlement capacity. Helen Sawyer noted that one Hmong boy who was in her Sunday school class in Laos was now in the United States, living in her town, just a few blocks away.⁴⁷ In fact, after following the Hmong from Laos and Thailand and to the United States, the Sawyers were the responsible for initiating the Hmong resettlement program in Wheaton, Illinois. “⁴⁸ Refugee resettlement was a moment when, as Malcolm Sawyer put it, “missions has come home.”⁴⁹

Seeing their refugee ministry as a mission, some church volunteers did indeed make explicit attempts to draw refugees into the church. Most typically, these volunteers did not see their resettlement activities as the delegated work of the state, but as a church effort in which saving souls was the ultimate goal and, as Pearl Jones put it, “sharing the Gospel with these people [was] of the uppermost.” She in particular took the Great Commission seriously and prioritized making disciples of refugees. “We wanted them to be saved,” she explained because “God, He expects us to do right, to choose the right way, and to help others find the way,” she said. To achieve this end, she and other members of Roseville Baptist Church made regular contact with the refugees they sponsored, picking them up every week to participate in Sunday

⁴⁶ Refugee Core Committee Records, St. Anthony Park Lutheran Church Archive.

⁴⁷ Helen Irvin Sawyer, interview, November 22, 1983, transcript.

⁴⁸ Malcolm Maurice Sawyer, interview, September 27, 1983, transcript.

⁴⁹ Malcolm Maurice Sawyer, interview, November 14, 1983, transcript.

worship services, teaching them in Sunday School, and leading them in Bible studies. Although Pearl Jones and the other volunteers were enthusiastic, they found the work challenging. “[W]e never did get them to understand what the Ten Commandments were that Moses received in the wilderness,” she said, looking back on one particular Bible study group that she helped to organize. Nonetheless, she saw their labors were fruitful. “Fourteen people were saved out of that group, you know, just meeting in their homes,” she said. Beyond teaching refugees the Bible, Pearl Jones believed that the most important way to introduce refugees to Jesus was to “just love ‘em!” as she said God had taught her to do. “I just remember what God impressed on my heart, that, ‘If you love these people, I’ll give you every one of them,’” she said. “And that’s what God did.”⁵⁰ Offering abundant Christian love was the missions approach that Jesus had taken and that she aspired to emulate. “I think the Scripture’s pretty replete in itself when you do what Jesus did,” she said. “Jesus just loved them, He cared for them, and it worked out, and it sure worked out for us because God did a great work in the church through getting the Hmong saved.”⁵¹

Pearl Jones’s approach to refugee work at Roseville Baptist resembled that of other evangelical Protestants. “Although church federations and church-based Volags of both types [mainline Protestant and conservative evangelical Protestant] have endorsed and organized sponsorships and both justify it in similar terms as a religious imperative, the evangelicals also view it as a means toward the salvation of souls,” Helen Fein observed. “Since they are more recently organized for social action, they evoke different repertoires of response as they draw on different recollections of past activity than do main-line clergy and laity who are more

⁵⁰ Pearl Jones, interview, digital recording at part 11.

⁵¹ Ibid., digital recording at part 14.

accustomed to social involvement.”⁵² Similarly, David North, in his 1981 study of voluntary agencies, found that refugees did not complain about proselytism often, and when problems did arise, they were primarily associated with World Relief, the resettlement agency affiliated with the National Association of Evangelicals.⁵³

Most volunteers did not identify sharing their faith as the primary goal of their work, but they were nonetheless delighted when they later learned that the refugees they assisted had become Christian. “I can remember bringing a Bible to the family, and then I thought afterwards, ‘What was the point of that? They can’t even read the language,’” recalled Dorothy Knight. Years later, one of the daughters of this family visited Saint Paul to attend a Christian conference. Now a grown woman and a devoted Christian, she set aside time to visit Dorothy Knight. “She wanted to make very sure that she had a chance to see me,” she said with a delighted chuckle, “and I thought, wasn’t that nice! You don’t know what seeds have sprouted and how they have sprouted, but, kind of like in teaching, you have to sow as generously as you can because you’re not going to be around for the harvest.”⁵⁴ Other congregational sponsors were similarly gladdened if the families they resettled chose to join their church. A Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services report from 1975, early in the Southeast Asian refugee resettlement effort, included several joyful statements from sponsors. “Our family attends church regularly as they have chosen to do themselves,” said one volunteer. “The family, especially through the head of the household, has embraced Christianity as an emerging way of life,”

⁵² Fein, *Congregational Sponsors of Indochinese Refugees in the United States, 1979-1981*, 59.

⁵³ North, Lewin, and Wagner, *Kaleidoscope*, 88.

⁵⁴ Dorothy Knight, interview, digital recording at part 10.

reported another. A third church shared that the family they had sponsored had named their newborn son “Paul Luther” in honor of the church, while a fourth church said, “The family is Catholic and despite our constant assurances they do not have to attend our church they insist on attending Catholic mass on Saturday night and our service on Sunday morning. They have never missed either since they arrived.”⁵⁵

If Hmong refugees took the initiative to seek baptism, how did churches proceed? The experience of Paul Tidemann offers one example of how churches introduced Christianity to Hmong refugees. In 1982, Paul Tidemann, as pastor of Saint Paul Reformation Lutheran Church, helped to sponsor thirty-one Hmong refugees, all of whom were baptized into the Lutheran church shortly after their arrival in Minnesota. When he became pastor of that church, there was already one Hmong family that was part of the congregation. “They came to me and said, ‘We would like to invite some of our family who are in camps in Thailand to come here, but we need to a sponsor body, a sponsoring agency,’” Tidemann recalled. The congregation discussed the matter and agreed to help the family resettle their family members. Throughout the process, Lutheran Social Service was not very involved with the day-to-day work of resettlement—“We did that ourselves,” Tidemann said—nor did it recruit the church. “This was something that we initiated ourselves” because of the Hmong congregants’ request, Tidemann explained.

When the family head, who was the husband of the first couple, requested that all thirty-one members of the group be baptized, Tidemann was cautious. “As soon as they came, within the week of their arrival, [the original Hmong members of the congregation] said to all their relatives, ‘You will come to worship at this church,’” Tidemann recalled. “And most of them did

⁵⁵ Standing Committee, Protocol, Minutes, November 6-7, 1975, Box 3, Department of Immigration and Refugee Service, Record Group 10/1, Evangelical Lutheran Church in American Archive.

not speak much English. They certainly were not Christian.” Nonetheless, he said, “they just all showed up on a Sunday morning in the congregation.” Tidemann was reluctant to deny the family the opportunity to fully participate in Sunday worship services. While other pastors might have felt uncomfortable about having unbaptized people receive Holy Communion, Tidemann believed that excluding the extended family from the ritual would send the wrong message. “My feeling was, these are people who are coming into an alien culture,” he said, “...and for me to do something that appeared to reject them in any way in terms of how they could participate, I felt would be injurious to their whole resettlement into a new culture and was not appropriate. So, if they wanted to come to receive Holy Communion, I would not restrict that.”

Understanding that Hmong people were coming from a very different religious and spiritual background, Tidemann tried his best to explain Christianity to the Hmong families and to find similarities between Christianity and indigenous Hmong religion. “We had to figure out how we were going to help them understand what it means to be Christian, what a worship service is about, all those kinds of things,” he said. He believed that the family had come into contact with Christians previously, in either Laos or in Thailand, but to be sure that the family members understood what baptism and what Christianity meant, he visited each of the homes of the six nuclear families. “And the basic thing that we developed for those conversations was to have the families tell us what their experience was like, what their life was like when they lived in Laos as Hmong people,” Tidemann said. Eventually, he asked more specific questions, which he used as an opportunities “to explain to them how is it in our culture we understand God” and to draw parallels between Christianity and indigenous Hmong religion. “Was there anything in their cultural background that was religious in some way, that had some relationship to that which is spiritual?” he asked. That would be like Christianity. “Did they have any experiences

with something like an initiation rite?” he asked. That was like baptism. “Did they have meals together? Did they have certain times in their family life where they celebrated birthdays or special occasions or anything like that?” That was like Holy Communion. Moreover, he explained his own role, as pastor, to be similar to the role of shamans in Hmong culture. These visits, in combination with efforts to have diverse members of the congregation serve as “baptismal sponsors” for each of the six Hmong nuclear families, meant that all thirty-one people were baptized within a month, in February 1982. Throughout the process, in Tidemann’s view, “they were welcomed and included as part of the community, included in the Christian community, at Saint Paul Reformation,” and, in keeping with the common argument in favor of congregational sponsorship, “the congregation became kind of their base community in this new culture.” The church offered “a larger extended family.”

In retelling this story, Tidemann acknowledged that a leader in the family had made the decision that the group should be baptized, and Tidemann himself was not sure how some members of the family truly felt about baptism. “You have to understand that they were functioning on command of their patriarch, so they would be very polite and say in whatever way they could that they understood what I was talking about and were very glad to be part of a church,” he said. Moreover, like Tom Kosel, he understood the complex dynamics of baptizing people who had been generously helped by the church. He believed, however, that the Hmong family was naturally open to Christianity because the church had shown such genuine hospitality. “[T]heir response was welcoming because they felt they were being welcomed,” he said.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Paul Tidemann, interview, part 10.

“They’ll know we’re Christian by what we do”

By the end of the twentieth century, however, Christians across denominations had begun to reconsider the meaning of missionary work as they began to grapple with ideas about pluralism and multiculturalism. Refugee resettlement, an enterprise that united elements of both international and home missions, expressed these new developments in missionary approaches.

On one hand, many Christians emphasized sharing Christianity through good works and “presence,” a reflection of how pluralism was reformulating how mainstream and liberal Christians approached service, witness, and missions. A growing recognition of religious and cultural diversity and a new interest in rethinking interreligious relations offered one impetus for change. As William Hutchison argued, “interfaith inclinations produced a more explicit questioning of the traditional assimilative aims of Christianity and of ‘Christian civilization.’” Among liberal Protestants and Catholics, he explained, “the church’s mission was being redefined as ‘Christian presence,’ while ‘conversion’ referred at least as much to the radical remaking of social structures as to the results that this kind of Christian witness might produce in individual lives. Whether operating overseas or working in ghettos at home, the witnessing Christian must not seek to impose some ready-made program, however firmly he or she might believe it to be God’s program. In taking up the concerns of others, one was to discern and honor ‘their issues and their structures.’”⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America the Contentious History of a Founding Ideal*, 223.

Rosemary Schuneman’s version of Catholic missionary work represented this shift toward recognizing and respecting the issues and structures of the people to whom she ministered. “[O]ne of the things we say is when we go to a culture, it’s sacred space,” she said, as she reflected on the constitution of her religious order, the School Sisters of Notre Dame. She added, “We do not impose our culture on them or our traditions.” This value was critical to how she assisted immigrants and refugees in adjusting to life in the United States. Her goal was to “help them here in Saint Paul to integrate their culture into the American culture,” but not to “push down anything that they tell me is a part of their culture.” This commitment arose from the belief that each person in her classroom is “sacred” and that “we belong to the same human family no matter where we go.”⁵⁸

Articulating an appreciation for the “sacred” dimension of all people as well as the broad intellectual shift toward greater religious toleration in the latter half of the twentieth century, Christian sponsors spoke of God’s bigness and of their own human aspiration to offer love across boundaries of cultural and religious difference.⁵⁹ Dorothy Knight proclaimed her pluralistic theology thusly:

I believe that God created the world—not just the people in one congregation in one particular place. If you’re in the world, then you’re part of creation, and there are different ways people view that. I think we know so little about the love of God, that to differentiate who God loves and who doesn’t God love, and what you should do at a certain time and what you should not do is so culturally oriented...There’s a book: *You’re God is Too Small*. If you’re in that kind of a prison, that’s your problem.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Rosemary Schuneman, interview, digital recording at part 3.

⁵⁹ Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 535.

⁶⁰ Dorothy Knight, interview, digital recording at part 8.

Later, she quoted John 3:16—“And God so loved the world”—to emphasize her belief in God’s universal love. “I think people really miss the boat if they think it’s this little enclave,” she said with an incredulous laugh. “I mean, God really loves *us*, and God doesn’t care about the rest of ‘em? Wouldn’t that be a strange God?”⁶¹

In keeping with this vision for missionary work, resettlement volunteers endeavored to witness to their Christian faith through their loving presence and through their acts of care and service. “I am not teaching any Catholic doctrine,” Rosemary Schuneman emphasized.

“Anything I teach about being a Christian is just who I am there.”⁶² Dianne Anderson held a similar philosophy. “[At First Lutheran Church] we tend to be kind of ‘live by our actions and not our words’ kind of a thing, where they’ll know we’re Christian by what we do, what’s in our hearts,” she said.⁶³ Her commitment to this form of Christian witness moved her to share a story that, as she retold it, caused her to well up with emotion. One of the women participating in the Hmong elder program had explained to Anderson that the people at First Lutheran showered her with a warmth and kindness that she had never before encountered. “She didn’t know what love really was until she met Christians in the United States,” Anderson recalled the woman telling her. “And I think that’s a wonderful statement for the religious community to hold onto.”⁶⁴

Similarly, refugee resettlement was a mission of cultivating relationships and friendships. “Our pastor stresses that in her sermons: it’s about relationships,” said Dianne Anderson. “...[A]n important part of our ministry is to not just to have our doors open for groups to use the

⁶¹ Ibid., digital recording at part 14.

⁶² Rosemary Schuneman, interview, digital recording at part 19.

⁶³ Dianne Anderson, interview, digital recording at part 9.

⁶⁴ Ibid., digital recording at part 4.

building—which a lot of places do, and that’s good, too—but that with that comes the relationships that you form with these other people and with other groups.”⁶⁵ That resettlement was fundamentally a ministry of friendship was a perspective shared by other volunteers across churches and denominations. Catholic Charities, for example, referred to sponsors as refugees’ “adopted’ friend.”⁶⁶ Mary Mergenthal also drew on the language of friendship to bring out a spirit of generosity in fellow church members whenever there was a possibility of tensions. As she recounted, the first Hmong family sponsored by Saint Anthony Park Lutheran Church lived above the church sanctuary, on the second story of the church building. For a few weeks, the smells of Hmong food wafted into Sunday School classrooms and offered congregation members a striking sensory introduction to the newest members of the community. “The smells in the upstairs were a little different for awhile, but, you know, it was okay,” she said with a laugh. “But in some ways, that was okay because it kind of gave more people a reality check, that these folks are really our friends—and they’re really here!”⁶⁷

Relationships with refugees were close, but church volunteers emphasized that they also aimed to respect the independence of the refugees they sponsored. “It’s a little bit like motherhood,” said Dorothy Knight. “Mothers are not someone to lean on; mothers are someone to make leaning unnecessary.” In time, she said, the refugees she helped developed “more independence” and “freedom,” to the point that her assistance was no longer necessary.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Ibid., digital recording at part 11.

⁶⁶ “Sponsors sought to help refugees,” *Catholic Bulletin*, August 8, 1980.

⁶⁷ Mary Mergenthal, interview, digital recording at part 8.

⁶⁸ Dorothy Knight, interview, digital recording at part 14.

Ultimately, helping refugees achieve this self-sufficiency was the goal of resettlement. “First of all, congregations who sponsor refugees soon become aware that these uprooted people are more than just characters in pathetic horror stories,” Joanne Karvonen wrote, in a reflection piece she later contributed to a Lutheran journal. “They are not babies or pets to be coddled and shown off in their native garb.”⁶⁹ Conscious of the temptation by some church sponsors to treat refugees as “pets,” she and the other members of the Saint Anthony Park Refugee Core Committee laid down a few basic principles for how they would approach resettlement. “One of those was that we had a real concern about respecting the wishes and needs of the family,” said Mary Mergenthal. The church intended to offer as much support and encouragement as possible, but also the privacy, space, and independence necessary for refugees to truly thrive.⁷⁰

Through these relationships, church volunteers saw resettlement as a mutually fulfilling form of service. Resettlement workers saw refugees as a gift and often emphasized that refugees gave back more than they received from the church volunteers. As Helen Fein observed, “What most recall without suppressing recognition of the problems is the enduring and unexpected positive consequences for them: their exhilaration on the refugees’ arrival, the lasting reciprocal affection, and their pride in giving the refugees a new start personally. ‘We got more than we gave them’ is an often-repeated comment, summing up the feelings of sponsors.”⁷¹ Church volunteers in the Twin Cities had similar feelings as the congregational sponsors in Fein’s study. Dianne Anderson found that, as the Hmong elder program progressed, it turned into something

⁶⁹ Joanne Karvonen, “Refugee Resettlement: One Congregation’s Transforming Experience,” *World and World: Theology for Christian Ministry* 29, no. 3 (2009): 250.

⁷⁰ Mary Mergenthal, interview, digital recording at part 3.

⁷¹ Fein, *Congregational Sponsors of Indochinese Refugees in the United States, 1979-1981*, 10.

valuable for both Hmong and American First Church elders. “So it is a Hmong/First Lutheran elder program!” she said.⁷² Dorothy Knight said that she learned as much from the refugees as they learned from her. “It was so interesting to me to learn from them, and I think whenever you’re teaching, you’re learning more than you’re teaching,” she said. “...They were glad to see me, I think. I was always glad to see them.”⁷³ The Hmong families she befriended through the refugee program brought her many gifts, including “generosity, acceptance, enthusiasm, excitement.” Reflecting further, she added, “and it was mutual! I mean, one of my students said about friendship: ‘If it isn’t mutual, it isn’t anything’...it rings so true.”⁷⁴ Like many people, Mark Franken saw refugees as a “gift.” “[I]t was like a new gift for me to be associated with them,” he said, “and that’s what got me committed to working with new refugees.”⁷⁵ In 1985, for the tenth anniversary of the Southeast Asian resettlement effort, he recalled how the Migration and Refugee Service of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the national Catholic voluntary agency, created a reflection piece entitled “Enriched by Their Presence.” “Everywhere we looked at it, it was a gift for us, having these folks come,” he said.⁷⁶ Later, he added, “I truly believe that we are better people the more we welcome newcomers here.” These newcomers, he said, “remind us how to be better people.”⁷⁷

⁷² Dianne Anderson, interview, digital recording at part 5.

⁷³ Dorothy Knight, interview, digital recording at part 7.

⁷⁴ Ibid., digital recording at part 14.

⁷⁵ Mark Franken, interview, transcript, p. 2.

⁷⁶ Ibid., transcript, p. 3

⁷⁷ Ibid., transcript, p. 12.

“How will these new immigrants be accepted?”

Pursuing refugee resettlement in accordance with new commitments to pluralism did not simply demand that sponsors redefine their own role to be “Christian presence.” Christian resettlement volunteers, in directly encountering religious differences in the refugees they served, also faced the challenge of learning how to accommodate the beliefs and practices of a religiously diverse refugee clientele. In 1964, a refugee affairs expert at the World Council of Churches observed, “We are now faced with the problem of refugees who are by and large nonwhite and by and large non-Christian...and it remains to be seen how we will react.”⁷⁸ A little over a decade later, in the immediate days after the fall of Saigon, Pastor Meeks at Christ Lutheran Church in Saint Paul shared a similar worry about the impending arrival of refugees from Southeast Asia. “Many problems will arise because of the new influx of people to America,” he said. Meeks confessed that the arrival of “new people coming from different cultures and backgrounds” made him apprehensive about a resettlement project unfolding in a nation and a community already burdened by racial, ethnic, and religious strife. “What we will have is a new minority group in America,” Meeks wrote. “How will these new immigrants be accepted?”⁷⁹

For much of the twentieth century, refugee resettlement in the United States has called people to serve their own kind. Voluntary agencies, many affiliated with Christian churches, received government support to assist co-ethnics or co-religionists. However, the last quarter of the twentieth century—particularly during the years following the Vietnam War—brought new

⁷⁸ Qtd. in Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 99.

⁷⁹ *Christ Lutheran Bulletin*, May 3, 1975, Minnesota Historical Society.

conditions for these organizations and the ministry of resettlement. American voluntary agencies and churches, committed to humanitarianism and global anti-communism, were now called to resettle refugees who were not only fellow Christians, but also Buddhists, Muslims, ancestor worshippers, and animists. At the same time, the context in which these groups undertook the work of resettlement was also changing. Both shifting religious demographics and changing ideas about the proper relationship between church and state contributed to new legal, political, and cultural norms governing an increasingly multireligious society. In these new circumstances, the church volunteers who rallied their congregations to sponsor a Southeast Asian refugee family were signing up for a resettlement project unprecedented in scope and complexity.

Government and voluntary agency officials understood the need to handle religious differences delicately, particularly in a resettlement system that relied on local congregations. “It was the first time that the Lutheran churches knowingly sponsored a refugee group which had had no previous, what should I say, connections with the Lutheran faith,” recalled Ingrid Walter, a former national of the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service. “It was a group of refugees rather than Lutheran refugees.”⁸⁰ For this reason, some resettlement officials testified before Congress that they hesitated to assign non-Christian refugees to Christian church sponsors. “[I]t was very hard to ask a parish to be responsible for somebody of another faith or no faith at all,” said Frank Wisner, deputy director of the Interagency Task Force. The concern ran both ways, that parishes would refuse to assist somebody who was not a co-religionist and that refugees would refuse to be sponsored by a congregation that was not of their own church. At the same Congressional hearing, Julia Taft, head of the Interagency Task Force on Refugees, noted that the United States Catholic Conference resettled three-quarters of Vietnamese refugees because

⁸⁰ Ingrid Walter, interview, transcript, p. 30.

Vietnamese refugees wished to be resettled by fellow Catholics and were “reluctant to be processed by a religious group of another denomination.”⁸¹

The shift to a more religiously diverse refugee clientele was a change that local resettlement officials and congregational volunteers noticed, too. Dianne Anderson proudly noted that First Lutheran Church served a diverse group of people. “We have some who are still practicing the shamanism, and our translator is a retired Baptist minister, so we have the whole gamut,” she said.⁸² Congregation-based resettlement volunteers appear to have been well aware of the complications of working with refugees who were religiously and culturally different from themselves.

Lutheran efforts in the early 1970s to resettle Ugandan Asians, who were predominantly Muslim, offered a useful first opportunity to think about how to accommodate religious difference. According to a report prepared for Lutheran Immigration and Refugee service, “the Ugandan Asians did not report suffering any religious harassment at their sponsors' hands.” Rather, “the Lutheran congregations extended a warm hand of friendship to the Ugandan Asians without any ulterior motives or any expectation of rewards, at least in this world.” Their sponsoring congregation only invited Ugandan refugees to church “so that they could enlarge their circle of friends and feel that they had access to their congregation.”⁸³ The Ugandan Asian resettlement effort was significantly smaller than the Southeast Asian refugee program that started shortly after, and there is no evidence that any congregations in the Twin Cities had had

⁸¹ “Refugees from Indochina,” 1975 Congressional Oversight Hearing.

⁸² Dianne Anderson, interview, digital recording at part 4.

⁸³ Standing Committee, Protocol, Minutes, June 28-29, 1976, Department of Immigration and Refugee Service, Record Group 10/1, Evangelical Lutheran Church in American Archive.

any direct involvement with assisting Ugandan refugees. However, that the 1976 report assessing the Ugandan refugee program clearly highlighted the lack of “religious harassment” as a success revealed that both congregations and voluntary officials were sensitive to the complications of Christian organizations resettling non-Christian refugees and were aware that accusations of aggressive proselytizing would undermine their resettlement work and the credibility of their organizations.

Similarly, when Southeast Asian refugees began to arrive in Minnesota, church sponsors were eager to make public declarations of their willingness and ability to serve refugees without the coercion and harassment that many feared would take place. At Dayton Avenue Church, Kathleen Vellenga made a point of sharing with the congregation that the Vang family had appreciated efforts by the church to accommodate religious difference. “Vangs mention frequently that they are glad their sponsorship are true friends, and that we do not require them to attend Protestant services weekly,” she reported to the congregation. “They often attend services at the Cathedral and the men occasionally worship at Dayton so they can be with their friends here.”⁸⁴

Sponsors emphasized that they drew strength from their religious convictions to serve refugees, but that their ultimate priority was compassionate care, free of conditions. “The theme that we apply—and still do—is we don’t welcome them because they are Catholic, but because we are Catholic,” said Mark Franken.⁸⁵ Tom Kosel echoed this sentiment, noting that one of the responsibilities of resettlement agencies was ensuring that Catholic Charities’ doors were open to even those who were not Catholic. “[O]ur basic principle is again that we’re here to serve and

⁸⁴ Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church Records, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁸⁵ Mark Franken, interview, transcript, p. 10.

regardless of religious background,” he said. “I think a basic tenet of Catholic social teaching is justice for all, and we don’t just focus on religion as a factor on who we help.”⁸⁶ Paul Tidemann, looking back on Saint Paul-Reformation Lutheran Church’s sponsorship history, noted the important lesson that they learned from the first Southeast Asian refugee family that the church sponsored in 1975. “The Vo family came to live in the apartment of Reformation Church, a large apartment which had often been used to house custodians and other staff in prior years. It became a more-or-less permanent home for three adults and four children for six years,” Tidemann recalled. “The Vo family took on some janitorial duties in the church and the congregation had time to learn who they were and what refugee issues were all about. Two other Vietnamese families joined the congregation as did a Cambodian family during this period, though the Vo’s did not. It became clear in these years that the goal of refugee sponsorship for Saint Paul-Reformation was first of all the human care for people, respecting their cultural and religious traditions. The choice of whether or not to identify formally with the Christian community was one which we believe refugees must make without the feeling of pressure or expectation from the congregation.”⁸⁷ Indeed, there is no evidence that churches ever rejected a refugee family because they were not of the same religion, even if congregations may have had a preference for resettling a co-religionist.

Aware of the religious diversity of her clientele, Rosemary Schuneman emphasized the need to be careful about respecting religious differences. Between 1982 and 1986, she collaborated with the Minnesota Literacy Council to train volunteer tutors from Saint Paul churches that hoped to start their own congregation-based English language programs. “One of

⁸⁶ Tom Kosel, interview, digital recording at 1:36:05-1:37:14.

⁸⁷ Paul Tidemann, “The Process of Trans-Cultural Change.”

the things that it was very important for me to say to the people from the churches was that, ‘Remember, you are there to teach English—you are not there to bring them into your church,’” she said. “And I wanted them to be sure that they understood that because I really firmly believe that when we approach anyone, we do not try to push our faith, our traditions, our doctrines, whatever, onto other people, that it’s up to them, if they want to ask about it and they feel comfortable about it.” She emphasized that bonds of care and similarities of belief and practice crossed lines of religious difference in her classroom. Her Muslim students told her that they pray for her and “talk to Allah” about her. “And when they talk about how many times they pray,” she said, “I tell them about how many times a day I pray, too, so that, you know, we’re the same!” Still, she pursued these conversations about what was sacred to her carefully, especially during Christmas and Easter, holidays when it is difficult to parse the distinctions between the religious and cultural meanings and traditions.

Schuneman’s commitment to affirming cultural background and respecting religious differences arose from a fundamental commitment to serving in an inclusive and open manner. She was reluctant to take outside grant money that might have placed restrictions on her work and imposed limits on who would be eligible to participate in her class. “I wanted to be open to anybody who came to my door who wanted to learn English,” she emphasized. Others working in resettlement did not always share her approach. At one point, she received a telephone call from an individual who demanded that she, as a Catholic sister, limit her class to only Catholic refugees. “And I said, ‘No way—that is too narrowing for me!’” she recounted. “Our sisters are called to deal with the poor, the marginalized, to be in solidarity with all people. I can no longer just put myself in a category and say, ‘I’m going to work only with Catholic people.’ I can’t do that anymore. My world has become bigger than that.” The telephone call left her “surprised”

and “upset” because it violated a core principle of her service: community. “I just see too many people making compartments,” she said, “and that’s not what community is about.” Sister Rosemary’s rejection of “compartments” reflected her deep religious commitment to serving and loving all people, including the marginalized.

If efforts to limit services to fellow Christians aroused criticism from people active in the faith-based resettlement community, so, too, did attempts by some sponsoring congregations to bring refugees dependent on their aid into the church. The open missionary purposes of some sponsoring churches—when combined with the generous help offered by churches, the close relationship between refugees and sponsors, the absence of oversight, and the ambiguity of guidance from the voluntary agencies—caused situations that unsettled some voluntary agency staff. Tom Kosel recalled one of these “unfortunate instances” that occurred during his days as a priest at a Catholic parish in Alexandria, Minnesota. He was involved with an ecumenical sponsorship project in which Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, and Baptist congregations jointly resettled a large extended family of refugees:

[O]ne of the churches was, in effect, trying to ‘convert’ the people to their religion, and they would actually pick them up, eight o’clock in the morning on Sunday, drive them over to their church, and have them attend their services, and then take them back home. And then, of course, being very practicing Catholics, [the refugee family] would then come to the Catholic church. And I didn’t hear about that, or I wasn’t aware of that, until quite a long time into it. But it was one of those things that has to be carefully watched when you’re dealing with congregations and refugees—that there’s a respect for refugees’ current religious beliefs. And we aren’t here to change their beliefs; we’re just here to help them.⁸⁸

Being “just there to help them,” it turns out, produced complicated situations for refugees.

“[B]ecause the refugee has been receiving so much help from somebody, maybe they can easily become or feel that they’re indebted to that person, and so they do not really tell that person

⁸⁸ Tom Kosel, interview, digital recording at 6:25-8:40.

where they're really coming from and what they really feel, but they want to please the person," Kosel reflected. "And this happens a lot in the religious area," he said. Such pressure was the direct consequence of the overwhelming generosity of the churches, institutions that served dual functions of performing the practical work of assisting refugees in addition to the prophetic work of sharing the Gospel. "The congregation does a wonderful job of giving [refugees] and helping them with all the material things that they need," Kosel said. "And the refugee then feels obligated to participate in that congregation's services. They don't want to—they don't need to, in their own mind—but they feel obligated to do it because of what they've received from the other, and that gets to be a really touchy area sometimes."⁸⁹ Others who worked in church sponsorship observed that refugees, if they did not feel a sense of obligation, at least felt deep gratitude for the help they were receiving and desired to reciprocate and to be polite and appreciative. The congregational sponsors who contributed to the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services report noted that the refugees they resettled were "very thankful and appreciative of what is being done for them" and "want to please and be agreeable."⁹⁰

This issue, in Kosel's view, affected not only in Alexandria, but was "all over the place" and was "one of the difficulties of the whole resettlement system." It was a problem, put simply, of religious diversity reshaping the landscape on which religious voluntary agencies operated. "[I]f people are of a particular religion," he said, "you would think that it's best to have them resettled or assisted in their resettlement by people of the same religion, but on the other hand, that isn't always possible, and so you get that tension—it's a long-standing thing." He added, "I can think of many times in my years at Catholic Charities that people went to a particular church

⁸⁹ Ibid., interview, digital recording at 30:10-31:23.

⁹⁰ ELCA Archive, 10/1, Box 3, November 6-7, 1975.

simply because that was the church that helped them at the beginning, and then, once they got over the hump, then that was the end of the connection anyway.” Not every volunteer felt this way, but “some congregations felt that, yeah, this was the way it’s supposed to be.”⁹¹ Ellen Erickson, director of the refugee resettlement programs at Lutheran Social Service, shared the same commitment to service without strings attached. “What’s important is to offer the friendship and support,” she said. “...What you need to caution them [churches] is that there’s not a price tag on your help.”⁹²

In committing to serving a religiously diverse refugee population, congregations adopted different approaches to managing religious difference. On one hand, some congregational sponsors considered religion to be a private matter and made efforts to separate religion from resettlement work entirely. Elaine Kirk, a volunteer with the sponsorship committee at Macalester-Plymouth Church, believed that it was fundamentally inappropriate to discuss the issue of religion with the refugees her church sponsored. Even after cultivating a friendship with one refugee family for over a decade, she said that she never once asked them about their religion.⁹³ Paj Ntaub Lis, a Hmong woman who arrived in the United States as a child, described the couple that sponsored her family as having a similar understanding of the privateness of religion. Though the couple visited frequently and was a steadfast source of support and

⁹¹ Tom Kosel, interview, digital recording at 31:30-32:44.

⁹² Ellen Erickson, qtd. in Wendy Tai, “Unsettling influences,” *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, February 8, 1993.

⁹³ Elaine Kirk, interview by the author, July 26, 2012, Saint Paul, Minnesota, digital recording at part 5.

encouragement, the couple never once, throughout their two-decade-long relationship with her family, raised the issue of religious beliefs and practices.⁹⁴

But if some congregational sponsors believed that the safest way to handle religious difference was to avoid mention of it altogether, many other congregations actively engaged in religious and cultural difference and adopted a more interventionist approach to accommodation, making efforts to ensure that refugees could maintain their religious traditions. Many sponsoring congregations helped refugees find churches and temples to join, reflecting the belief by resettlement officials that church membership offered the community support that is essential for newly arrived refugees to adjust and succeed in America. For example, a volunteer with the sponsorship committee at Gustavus Adolphus Lutheran Church learned that one large Hmong refugee family wanted to attend her church. Gustavus Adolphus Church, however, did not have the means to transport all nine members of the family, so the volunteer contacted the coordinator of the sponsorship committee at Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church to see if that she could assist the family in attending Sunday services there. Though Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church was Presbyterian, not Lutheran, the sponsorship volunteers were very eager to help the Hmong family find a congregation close to home that they could join.⁹⁵ Similarly, at Saint Anthony Park Lutheran Church, volunteers with the Refugee Core Committee regularly drove their sponsored Hmong families to local Hmong churches, and they went to great lengths to find a church home for the Christian Hmong families they sponsored.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Neng Vang and Paj Ntaub Lis, interview, digital recording at 1:04:00-1:08:00.

⁹⁵ Box 21-24, 51-52, Case Files, International Institute of Minnesota Records, IHRC3257, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

⁹⁶ Refugee Core Committee Records, St. Anthony Park Lutheran Church Archive.

Helping refugees find a religious home extended beyond connecting refugees with Christian congregations. Several congregations helped Southeast Asian refugees find Buddhist temples in which they could worship. Mark Franken was involved in one of these efforts in Ohio, when he was working primarily with Vietnamese refugees. “Most of them were Buddhist, and there was absolutely *nothing* in the way of organized Buddhist religion in Columbus, so we actually helped create a Buddhist temple and provided space for them to do that,” he said. “...[I]n those days, we reached out to Washington, the Buddhist temple here, and asked the monk to visit Columbus periodically, and we would pay for him to come and all that kind of thing because we felt that we—the people wanted to have a structured way of living their faith, and it’s an important part of belonging. It’s an important part of the transition from being *without* to *belonging*, so it was an investment that we felt we needed to make.”⁹⁷

Sponsoring congregations were generally interested in learning about the religions of the refugees they sponsored. At Saint Anthony Park Lutheran Church, the Refugee Core Committee sponsored a Muslim family from Somalia. One member attended a seminar about Islam hosted by Augsburg College and reported back to the group about what she had learned.⁹⁸ Sponsorship committee also regularly shared informative books, newspaper, and magazine articles with each other, and, as mentioned earlier, they eagerly shared information about the cultural and religious backgrounds of the refugees they sponsored in events for the whole congregation.

Holidays, especially Christmas, provided sponsors special opportunities to engage in dialog and explore religious similarities and differences. Sponsors were eager to meet with

⁹⁷ Mark Franken, interview, transcript, p. 11.

⁹⁸ Refugee Core Committee Records, St. Anthony Park Lutheran Church Archive.

Hmong refugees and to “interview” them about how they celebrated Christmas in Laos.⁹⁹ At the same time, sponsors desired to include refugees in holiday celebrations and to introduce them to what they considered fun, American traditions. “[T]he season will be a big change for some 700 refugees settled through the archdiocesan office to soak up American culture as sponsors and new friends introduce them to American Christmas customs ranging from carols to Kris Kringle to the traditional Christmas dinner with turkey and all the trimmings,” reported the *Catholic Bulletin* in 1975. “According to Miss Loftus, [the refugee coordinator for Catholic Charities], ‘Their goal is to be one with us. They really want to know about our culture. (The Resettlement office’s) philosophy is to show them how we do things and make them a part of it.’” While many Southeast Asian refugees were Catholic, there were many non-Christian Southeast Asian refugees, and sponsors took deliberate care to respect the religion of Vietnamese and Cambodian Buddhists during religious holidays such as Christmas. In dealing with Buddhist refugees during the holidays, sponsors hoped to avoid causing offense and emphasized the holiday as an opportunity to find areas of common belief and practice. “The sponsors have also taken time to explain the meaning of Christmas to non-Catholic refugees,” the *Catholic Bulletin* continued. “A Buddhist family sponsored by St. Odilia’s parish Shoreview, ‘has a good appreciation of what Christianity is and how Christ fits in, and we’ve tried to explain what Christmas is to us,’ according to Br. Jim Brigl, OSC, who has helped coordinate the parish’s refugee effort. ‘We’ve told the family that Christmas gives us hope for growth in our lives and that’s an idea that’s important in Buddhism too,’ he said.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ I Box 21-24, 51-52, Case Files, International Institute of Minnesota Records, IHRC3257, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

¹⁰⁰ Pat Westberg, “Viets ‘Home’ for First White Christmas,” *Catholic Bulletin*, December 19, 1975.

Congregational sponsors knew that Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees were often Buddhist and that Somali and Ugandan Asian refugees were often Muslim; these groups were members of major world religions that were known to Christian resettlement workers, even if they did not have previous experience in directly interacting with these religious communities. However, sponsors of Hmong refugees had a more difficult time because Hmong people did not obviously have a religion—or, rather, the Hmong did not have a recognizable, institutionalized religion that was familiar to their Christian sponsors. Unlike the traditions of Muslim or Buddhist refugees, Hmong beliefs and practices are not centered in a mosque or a temple. Their indigenous religion does not have a core text, a famous founder, or an official name. The Hmong themselves do not even have a very consistent translation for the word “religion” in their native language. Indigenous Hmong religion utterly confounded the Protestant-centric definition of religion, so much so that the question of what Hmong religion is remains, to this day, uncertain.

For Americans eager to respect religious difference, of course, this situation put sponsors in a quandary: how does one accommodate religion when it is not even clear that Hmong traditions constitute a religion? The evidence suggests that there were genuine efforts to accommodate indigenous Hmong traditions when it was understood that Hmong beliefs and practices were, in fact, religion. Biloine Young, in her profile of the Center for International Health, described how a Hmong woman suffering a severe brain injury requested that her craniotomy be postponed so that she could seek the help of a shaman. According to Young, the neurosurgeon assigned to her case was “a deeply religious man” whose own faith opened his heart to the need of interreligious understanding. “The neurosurgeon respected and understood their position of faith,” she wrote. Rather than force the woman to have a procedure that she

believed would harm her body and her spirit, he encouraged the woman's family to bring her home for the shaman's ceremony and to return to the hospital if they decided that they would like to proceed with the surgery. The family brought the woman home for the shaman's ritual, which restored her spiritual health, and then agreed to have the woman undergo a craniotomy shortly after. Ultimately, it was the surgeon's understanding of the woman's convictions as religious—and his own belief in the importance of honoring religious commitments—that provided the basis for mutually respectful resolution to this situation.¹⁰¹

This encounter between the Hmong woman and her neurosurgeon went more smoothly than some of the person-to-person efforts by congregational sponsors and pastors to understand indigenous Hmong religion. Because Hmong beliefs and practices often fell far outside the norms of Judeo-Christian America, Christian resettlement workers struggled in their efforts to comprehend and classify Hmong beliefs and practices and used what they did know to make sense of indigenous Hmong religion. Some church sponsors, particularly those coming from an evangelical background, considered indigenous Hmong religion to be a form of devil worship, just as the Sawyers and Andrianoffs had decades earlier. Pearl Jones of Roseville Baptist Church described how she feared for the souls of the Hmong refugees, whose rituals, she believed, centered on “evil spirits”: “they worshipped them in the jungle,” she said, and they “go out and take food to them and all this stuff.”¹⁰² Her understanding of Hmong beliefs and practices sometimes elided indigenous Hmong religion and other Asian religions; at one point, she

¹⁰¹ Young, *My Heart It Is Delicious: Setting the Course for Cross-Cultural Health Care*, 23–24.

¹⁰² Pearl Jones, interview, digital recording at part 6.

described how the Hmong “were worshipping Buddha back in Thailand.”¹⁰³ Like Linwood Barney, she described indigenous Hmong religion as “demonic things that they had to put up with.”¹⁰⁴

Many other church sponsors, however, did not consider indigenous Hmong religion to be a form of devil worship or spirit bondage, but an important spiritual tradition that merited respect and understanding, and these sponsors made earnest efforts to comprehend indigenous Hmong religion, drawing on their knowledge of other world religions, especially indigenous religions, to do so. In particular, Minnesotan church sponsors, familiar with the Dakota and Anishinaabe peoples who first populated their state, drew parallels between Hmong animism and Native American traditions. “[I]f you take a look at some of the Native American practices, they can seem pretty similar to some of the Hmong practices,” said Tom Kosel, who believed that these similarities “helped people to understand the Hmong culture a little bit more.”¹⁰⁵ Dorothy Knight discerned not only similarities in beliefs and practices, but also historical experiences: she regarded both Hmong and Native American people as distinctively adaptable, as they were used to “being on the run.” Hmong people’s ability to survive, especially in the face of encroachments by imperialistic outsiders, was “not too different from what Native Americans experienced when the settlers came into their territory in the United States,” she said.¹⁰⁶ Finally, direct experience working with Native Americans proved valuable to church sponsors. Paul Tidemann, in working with Hmong people in his “transcultural ministry” at Saint Paul

¹⁰³ Ibid., digital recording at part 11.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., digital recording at part 12.

¹⁰⁵ Tom Kosel, interview, digital recording at 40:12-40:54.

¹⁰⁶ Dorothy Knight, interview, digital recording at part 6.

Reformation Lutheran Church, valued his previous experience at Holy Trinity Church in Minneapolis, where he ministered to the local Native American community.¹⁰⁷

Having served as a missionary in Guyana, Paul Tidemann understood and accommodated indigenous Hmong religion in light of Hinduism and indigenous African religion, as well.¹⁰⁸ His missionary experiences at home and abroad made an indelible impression on him, as they exposed him to a rich array of spiritual beliefs and practices: in Guyana he ministered to African-descent Guyanese who believed in obeah; in Chicago, at a South Side church, he worked with an Episcopalian priest who planned an exorcism to heal congregation members who suffered mysterious, persistent sickness.¹⁰⁹ Due to this practical education in the mission field, he possessed “a basic understanding of how other cultures function” and, as a result, did not find himself “totally lost” in ministering to the Hmong church members, whom he aimed to understand in light of their preexisting religious and cultural framework.¹¹⁰ Familiar with religious communities that believed that bodily and spiritual afflictions were bound up in one another, he was cognizant of any “stuff up on the wall”—a home altar, for instance—that indicated troubles, and he understood that struggles with sickness “may have something to do with what’s going on in the back of their minds with regard to prior cultural or religious experience.” In remaining sensitive to both spiritual and physical wellness, he drew similarities between his work and that of a Hmong shaman. “Within Hmong culture, there is a strong sense of the presence of spirits, that can have both a positive or negative effect on an individual or a

¹⁰⁷ Paul Tidemann, interview, digital recording at part 3.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., digital recording at part 10.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., digital recording at part 13, 14.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., digital recording at part 10.

family or a community, and shamans' work often addresses that," he said.¹¹¹ He saw shamans as performing functions analogous to a pastor. "When I'm working with Hmong people, and the shamans are working with Hmong people, they're dealing with some parallel sorts of things, in some ways," he said.¹¹²

Tidemann's particular sensitivity to non-Christian cultures allowed for an appreciation of the significance of shamanism in indigenous Hmong religion and a greater willingness to accommodate its rituals. In particular, he may have been more willing to honor Hmong church members' requests to practice rituals that other Lutheran pastors condemned. As far as he knew, none of the Hmong families he had known at Saint Paul Reformation Lutheran Church visited shamans, but, reflecting on how he might have responded had such a situation occurred, he responded that he "would be okay" with his church members conducting shamanistic rituals, as long as these practices were not "causing them pain, difficulty of any sort." After some thought, he explained, "if the advice that they are getting from a shaman, or the religious expression that they are engaged in with the shaman, is helpful for them, all well and good."¹¹³ Broadly speaking, he did not see Lutheranism and indigenous Hmong religion as mutually exclusive, and in his work with Hmong Lutherans, he encouraged an affirmation of the value of their cultural background and native religious traditions. "I think we need to help people acknowledge aspects of their spirituality which might be helpful, and other aspects of their spirituality which might be harmful, and that goes for Christianity as well as any other religion," he said. He believed that one of the most important ways that he could help Hmong refugees was "to affirm who they

¹¹¹ Ibid., digital recording at part 14.

¹¹² Ibid., digital recording at part 10.

¹¹³ Ibid., digital recording at part 15.

basically are as human beings out of the culture from which they come.” Moreover, he emphasized that “to become a Christian does not mean that you throw everything out the door with regard to the cultural and spiritual experience that you have had.”¹¹⁴

Most church sponsors, even if they were interested in missionary work, did not have the same experience with obeah-believing Guyanese to inform how they approached indigenous Hmong religion. Most volunteers became aware of the practice and significance of Hmong rituals primarily through their direct relationships with Hmong people and the “face-to-face ministry” of resettlement. Herein lay both the greatest strength and the greatest weakness of the congregational sponsorship model: if close encounters with religious difference increased the odds that misunderstandings and conflicts would occur, so, too, did close encounters improve understanding of indigenous Hmong religion and, in turn, increase the likelihood that misunderstandings and conflicts could be avoided. Sponsorship manuals helped, said Tom Kosel,

but the other, most important way is to be able to sit down and learn from the people themselves, what their practices are and why they do things the way they do. You learn by being part of it and being with the people. And that’s one of the advantages of the host family situation is that you do get people together and they do have a chance to talk about what things, what things in their lives are done differently in one culture or another. You can’t just sit from the outside and throw a blanket over it and say, ‘This is the way we do it.’ You have to be with people and talk it over and try to understand it by talking it through.

Because of refugee resettlement, he argued, “people learned that there’s more than one way of looking at things, and, like I’ve said before, it broadened people’s horizons. They understood why they would do things this way rather than that way, and it helped people to be a little more accepting of other ways of living.”¹¹⁵ This openness to engaging in open, generous,

¹¹⁴ Ibid., digital recording at part 13.

¹¹⁵ Tom Kosel, interview, digital recording at 27:15-27:40.

sincere dialogue with others was the most important responsibility of a refugee sponsor, in Mark Franken's view. "Meet them on their terms, not yours," he said. "That means get to know *them*; that's your responsibility."¹¹⁶

In addition to the direct human encounter between people of different religions, a shift toward being "more accepting of other ways of living" and meeting refugees "on their terms" also arose from the notion that Hmong people were part of God's creation and that indigenous Hmong religion was a legitimate expression of God's sacred reality. Rejecting life in a Christian "enclave," Dorothy Knight, like many other church volunteers, participated in traditional Hmong rituals when they were invited to do so. Some Hmong shamans she knew—people whom she assisted and later considered dear friends of hers—invited her to attend important ceremonies, such as the "birthing ceremony" for a newborn baby. The ritual was new to her, and fascinating. "A chicken was killed in the kitchen, as part of the traditional celebration," she recounted. "Lots of food and lots of different flavors for me, and it was a wonderful thing to be included in the celebrating because everybody was very happy." Dorothy Knight also appreciated being included in Hmong funeral ceremonies, which she found "very moving." It was educational for her to witness the practice of Hmong rituals and, beyond that, she found that the experience of joining her Hmong friends for these ceremonies strengthened their bond of friendship and elevated her appreciation of their common humanity. "The main issues of life are very similar, and the emotions can vary a great deal, but there's a lot of similarity," she said, adding that "it's very special to be included in what's important to them, I think."¹¹⁷ If Hmong refugees invited Christian resettlement volunteers to participate in indigenous rituals, Christian church sponsors

¹¹⁶ Mark Franken, interview, transcript, p. 15.

¹¹⁷ Dorothy Knight, interview, digital recording at part 8-9.

sometimes integrated Hmong practices into their daily life as a gesture of respect. For weeks at a time, Father Robert Wellisch, a Catholic priest serving the Twin Cities, was known to wear strings—which were tied around his wrist as a blessing during a Hmong *khi tes* ceremony—to demonstrate his connection to the Hmong community to whom he ministered.¹¹⁸

Although many church sponsors expressed a commitment to serving Hmong refugees with religious tolerance and respect, this goal was ultimately difficult to achieve. Indigenous Hmong religion was so foreign to sponsors and so confounding to sponsors' conceptions of religion that indigenous Hmong religion could not even be seen. In addition, sponsors appear to have been operating with incomplete or inaccurate information about the religious backgrounds of the Hmong. In one update that she sent to the members of Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church, Kathleen Vellenga noted that “because most Hmong are Christian they are objects for retaliation by the Communists and for this reason many had to flee.”¹¹⁹ In truth, most Hmong refugees did not identify as Christian. In this instance and in many others, congregations' attempts to respect the religious beliefs of the refugees they sponsored were fundamentally undermined by a lack of comprehension about what those religious differences involved.

Even if sponsors found ways to understand indigenous Hmong religion, they did not always do anything with this information. Refugee resettlement, no doubt, was a demanding, time-consuming ministry. Refugees had abundant immediate needs and sometimes arrived with only a few hours of notice. Church sponsors had their hands full, leaving little time to do extensive research on the religious backgrounds of the families they resettled. “Through reading,

¹¹⁸ Nolan Zavoral, “Hmong Catholics Lose a Good Friend,” *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, May 26, 2003.

¹¹⁹ Dayton Parish News of Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church, September 1976, Minnesota Historical Society.

through talking, through sometimes referring to counselors, appropriate counselors, we've tried to address the cultural differences and tried to learn what we need to know to deal with these people as human beings," said Joanne Karvonen. However, she added, "there isn't always time to learn about the culture in depth and to really say all the things that you think you should say to these people because you're so busy setting up a bed and finding blankets and getting them winter jackets and those things. It's really easy to let those materialistic concerns take over, which they have to, to a certain extent."¹²⁰ In the end, in a government resettlement program that emphasized economic independence, finding a job mattered far more than finding a lost and wandering soul. Moreover, in the Christian ministry of refugee care, helping Hmong refugees to locate a shaman or secure a chicken for a ritual sacrifice was often not a priority. In the eyes of some resettlement workers, doing so might actually have been a sin.

For the church volunteers who served as America's welcoming committee for newly arrived refugees, refugee resettlement was a ministry of Christian compassion. Therein lay its most distinctive asset: the dedication found in people pursuing morally meaningful work. At the same time, the religious character of resettlement work raised concerns about the overlap of church and state and the implications of such church-state collaboration for an increasingly multireligious refugee population.

Refugee resettlement was a church enterprise in which easy distinctions between religious and non-religious work were difficult, even impossible. Voluntary agencies attempted to guide congregations on the proper place of religion in resettlement work. However, as a close look at congregational activity demonstrates, church volunteers straddled the boundary between

¹²⁰ Joanne Karvonen, interview, digital recording at part 10.

public and private, and church and state, in almost everything that they did. Religion was not just manifested in sharing Bibles and participating in worship services—it was expressed in the simple act of serving the poor, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and offering shelter to the war-weary. Welcoming the stranger was a responsibility handed down to churches by government resettlement policies, but church volunteers also saw resettlement as a responsibility handed down to them by God. It was a religious practice that expressed some of the most cherished principles in the Christian tradition. And, for some, it was also religious mission of saving the souls of non-Christian refugees, who were arriving in the United States by the thousands—delivered by God, some people believed.

Distinguishing appropriate and inappropriate religious activities was tricky because many activities fell in the overlapping territory of the prophetic work of the church and the public work of government. In general, there is little evidence to suggest that congregational sponsors violated the rules set forth in the resettlement manuals. No sponsors, for example, withheld resettlement aid to refugees who were religiously different from themselves. At the same time, it is difficult to determine with any certainty whether or not churches' sponsorship relationship with refugees fully abided by the expectations of government and voluntary agencies, either. There was little government and voluntary agency oversight, and local congregations were free to interpret the rules as they best saw fit. In this heavily delegated, complex system of resettlement, congregations typically had no direct and visible tie to government, and church volunteers rarely saw their work as delegated to them by the state.

Furthermore, even if sponsoring congregations made honest efforts to respect the religious beliefs of refugees, as voluntary agency and government officials urged them to do, it was not, in fact, easy to do so. Again, because the work of resettlement was so deeply imbued

with Christian meaning, it was as difficult to disentangle what was Christian and what was not Christian as it was to separate the religious from the non-religious. Christian resettlement workers often made earnest efforts to accommodate and understand indigenous Hmong religion. Yet putting abstract concepts of pluralism into practice in the day-to-day work of resettlement was new and sometimes difficult, especially for Christian volunteers who conceptualized their work in missionary terms and were assigned to serve a community of refugees whose religious beliefs and practices were so foreign that they were almost invisible.

In circumstances of such ambiguity, intention mattered, but so did interpretation. Sponsors' objectives did not always align with how refugees understood them. Sponsors invited refugees to participate in Sunday services, for example, out of the intention to facilitate bonds of community and to promote refugees' cultural adjustment; however, these actions were sometimes seen as inappropriate religious pressure. A similar issue arose in matters of religious accommodation: sponsors may have intended to serve refugees in a tolerant and pluralistic manner, but Hmong refugees might not have seen these efforts as such. Refugees, indeed, were not always in the best position to lodge complaints.

As the case of Hmong resettlement illustrates, in a resettlement project pursued jointly by church and state, the broad reach and uncertain boundaries of "religion" were important and impactful. Uncertainty about what constituted religious activity in Christian resettlement meant that religion could not be easily contained and controlled. At the same time, uncertainty about whether indigenous Hmong religion was a rightful religion meant that their beliefs and practices could not be easily accommodated and respected. The significance of the religious dimensions of resettlement work is rendered even more clearly when seen from the perspective of Hmong

refugees, whose encounter with Christianity and whose indigenous religious transformations are the focus of the next two chapters.

Chapter Five:
Following the New Way, Part I -
Refugee Resettlement and Hmong Christianity in the United States

Neng Xiong was one of the refugees that Kathy Vellenga welcomed at the airport on that wintry morning in 1976, the conclusion of what was, for Neng, a journey shaped by divine intervention. Decades later, as she looked back on her life, she emphasized that it had been God who delivered her to safety. Her memories lingered on God's hand in rescuing her family on a chaotic tarmac in war-torn Laos. "A huge fight broke out at the airport there," she said, "...it was hard to get into the plane." Pushing through the crowds, she managed to climb into one plane, but she was separated from her children in the process. "They were crying, looking for me," she said. "I was crying, looking for them." The door of the airplane closed, and she saw some of her children, terror-stricken, pound on the window to catch the attention of the pilot. The pilot allowed these children to board the plane, but as he began to steer the aircraft down the runway, Neng saw that some of her other children, left behind, were chasing the airplane on the tarmac. "There were a couple of my kids still running after the plane!" Neng recalled, "and so I said, 'Please stop the plane. I still have kids outside—please stop!' And they stopped the plane and got my kids inside the plane." To Neng Xiong, a devout Christian, her family's journey to safety, from Laos to Thailand and eventually to Saint Paul, was due to providential intervention and offered proof of God's goodness and faithfulness. "I just know it in my heart that it was God who guided me every step of the way," she said.¹

¹ Neng Xiong, interview by the author, translated by Maile Vue, August 3, 2012, Minneapolis, Minnesota, digital recording at part 10-11.

Like Neng Xiong, Cher Moua found his journey to America as revelatory of God's blessings. But while Neng Xiong's harrowing journey deepened her commitment to a faith she had adopted in Laos, Cher Moua's voyage to America journey brought a religious revolution. Raised in a family that practiced indigenous Hmong religion, he discovered Christianity after resettling in the United States and understood his finding salvation in Jesus Christ as inextricably tied to his finding refuge in America. Just as many Hmong refugees envisioned the United States, he and other Hmong Christians saw a church life as "a life of freedom, a life of liberty." As he explained, "My journey from the jungles of Laos to cross the Mekong River to Thailand and to America—it's a physical journey that amplifies or exemplifies my spiritual journey."²

The providential narratives of migration told by Neng Xiong and Cher Moua are common in the stories that Hmong Christians have told about their journey to the United States, and yet the story merits unpacking. Christian churches no doubt played an important role in bringing Neng Xiong and Cher Moua to Minnesota. Refugee resettlement policies, by delegating much of the work of resettlement to Christian agencies and congregations, established relationships between Hmong refugees and Christian church sponsors and set the stage for complex religious interactions. How did Hmong refugees respond to their encounter with Christian resettlement workers? How did Hmong refugees understand the Christianity of their sponsors? If Hmong refugees became Christian themselves, what meaning did Christianity hold for them?

I argue that in the United States, refugee resettlement policies placed refugees in the care of church sponsors and, in the process, facilitated relationships that precipitated the decision by

² Cher Moua, interview by the author, September 6, 2012, Saint Paul, Minnesota, digital recording at part 10.

many Hmong refugees to participate in Christian churches and adopt Christianity. However, those Hmong who adopted Christianity did so on their own terms. “Conversion” for many Hmong refugees was not a simple bimodal process. The acquisition of Christian beliefs and practices did not preclude belief and practice of indigenous Hmong religion, and some Hmong refugees continued to worship their ancestors or visit shamans when they were sick, even if they were Christian. Moreover, Hmong Christians retained an indigenous cosmology and religious framework, and they adopted Christian beliefs and practices out of the belief that Christianity offered access to practices and entities that would assist them in maintaining harmonious relations with the spirit world.

Hmong approaches to Christian conversion revealed fundamental differences in how Hmong people understood the meaning and purposes of religion. Hmong people expected religion, rituals, and beliefs to offer immediate help with practical problems that they understood as having a spiritual dimension, especially sickness. Practicing evidence-based religion, they looked for empirical proof—manifested in physical health, in particular—that their rituals, whether Christian or indigenous, were efficacious. They understood conversion as an additive process that involved the acquisition of a new ways of managing old spirits and addressing problems in both the seen and unseen worlds. Hmong refugees, responsive to changes in circumstances, were often willing to try different approaches to solving spiritual problems and were thus perpetual religious migrants. Christian conversion was one of many religious changes that Hmong people pursued throughout an entire lifetime of seeking spiritual security amid the tumult of war, dislocation, and resettlement.

“Raising a little baby from the beginning”

When asked to describe their experience with church sponsorship, Hmong refugees recalled how churches helped refugees in a variety of ways. “[W]e were so lucky!” said Timothy Vang. “The church helped us in everything.” Sponsored by a Catholic church in Green Bay, Wisconsin, he recalled how one couple took charge of the resettlement effort and gave generously of their time and money. “So the wife spent most of her time helping us, taking us to schools, and finding jobs for the adults in the family, visiting us. After six months, then she found another house for us because that house belonged to the Catholic nuns, and the nuns would like to move in again, so we found another house and moved out. That sponsors was very helpful to us! I feel bad for the other families that did not have good sponsors like us.”³ Kia Vue, who was resettled in a small town in Oklahoma, recalled how her sponsors visited regularly to teach the adults at home and brought her children trick-or-treating during Halloween.⁴ Similarly, Yong Kaye Moua expressed appreciation for the organized, comprehensive help he received from his sponsoring church, Trinity Lutheran Church in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. He had a job waiting for him immediately upon arrival because one of the church members had a connection at a local company, and preparations were made for instruction for his wife and schooling for the children. “Each week, one couple come to take us to do one thing,” he said. “So, in order for us to go to school at that time, they already lined up babysitter for us, and some couple take morning, some couple take afternoon. And everything kind of laid down and had a plan for helping us at that

³ Timothy Vang, interview, digital recording at part 3.

⁴ Kia Vue, interview, digital recording at part 7.

time.” Hundreds of people at the church offered friendship, he said.⁵ Sponsors assisted refugees not only in learning how to do regular tasks such as taking the city bus and using the stove, but participated in special, even intimate, occasions. Neng Vang recalled that, when she went into labor with her second child, her sponsor, Bob, was the one who accompanied her to the hospital to deliver the baby. Another volunteer family brought Christmas presents for Neng Vang’s children every year.⁶ Xai Thao, who arrived in Minnesota in 1985, recalled how important these services were during her first days in the United States. “Our sponsor helped us apply for welfare and the necessary things that we need. Our sponsor showed us around and made sure that we were okay,” she said. “...They helped our family and gave us a peace of mind.”⁷

Although relatives sponsored many refugees in later years, Hmong refugees, looking back on their coming to America, emphasized the central involvement of Christian religious communities in the resettlement effort. In fact, in the personal narratives told many Hmong refugees, their resettlement was not a government project, but, rather, a church effort. “I believe, I totally believe, that people who came to the U.S. here were just not sponsored individually by another relative,” said True Xiong. “I believe that they were sponsored through churches, a group...they’re the ones who are responsible.”⁸ Sometimes Hmong refugees often could not remember the denominations or names of the churches that had sponsored them—but they were certain that their sponsor had been a Christian church. Neng Xiong, for example, could only identify her sponsor as “the church near the plaza near [I]-94 and Western.” The prominence of

⁵ Houa Vue Moua and Yong Kaye Moua, interview, digital recording at part 4.

⁶ Neng Vang and Paj Ntaub Lis, interview, digital recording at 35:00-37:00.

⁷ Xai Thao, interview, transcript.

⁸ True Xiong, interview, digital recording at part 14.

churches in Hmong memory was such that Hmong refugees sometimes believed that they had been sponsored by church-affiliated agencies, even if they had not been. “[T]he majority of the money that helped us come over here were from the Catholic Charities,” said Neng Xiong. In fact, other sources suggest that three Protestant churches—Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church, Macalester-Plymouth Church, and House of Hope Presbyterian Church—sponsored her family through the resettlement efforts of a non-religious agency, the International Institute of Minnesota.⁹

Even if churches loomed large in the collective memory of Hmong refugees looking back on their resettlement in the United States, some Hmong refugees were not necessarily aware of what churches were. “I don’t think we even realized that church was church,” recalled Yia Lee with a laugh.¹⁰ She was a child when she arrived in Minnesota with her family, who had been sponsored by a Baptist church in Roseville. “It didn’t even register” that her sponsors were Christian, she said. “It was just nice people helping people!”¹¹

Yia Lee’s memory of her sponsors—as “nice people helping people”—reveals another important theme in Hmong resettlement stories that accords with how churches remembered their sponsorship experience: refugee resettlement produced many close, almost familial, relationships between refugees and Christian church volunteers. When asked what the most important help that Trinity Lutheran Church offered his family, Yong Kaye Moua said, “I think

⁹ International Institute Records, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota; Kathleen Vellenga, interview, digital recording at 18:41-19:40; Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church Records, Minnesota Historical Society.

¹⁰ Yia Lee, interview by the author, July 29, 2012, Saint Paul, Minnesota, digital recording at part 6.

¹¹ Ibid., digital recording at part 7.

that the friendship is number one.” He was grateful for the outpouring of love shown by the congregation through home visits, phone calls, and warm conversations, all of which made the transition to the United States easier. “I think that bring us the friendship, the confidence, and the closeness to the community,” he said.

Tzianeng Vang, who arrived in Missouri as a teenager, recalled the close relationship he shared with the pastor of the church that sponsored him. “He was so proud of me,” he said. “Everyday I improved, I acquired a new word and would talk to him; he was just so proud...I became probably the son that he wanted because he only had two daughters.” The pastor regularly brought Tzianeng Vang to two congregations that he led—“I’m his experiment” to show off, he said—and once brought him to a big church in a neighboring city for a special Thanksgiving service at which he had been invited to preach. There, at the center of this enormous church with its balconies that resembled English theatres, the pastor praised the boy’s progress before the crowd of people gathered at the church. He said, as Tzianeng Vang recalled, “that he’s so proud that, within a week [after] we arrived, this many English words I already acquired.” The attention in such a prestigious setting filled him with “awe.” Later, the close relationship was one reason why it was difficult for the family to leave Missouri to reunite with relatives elsewhere. The pastor “didn’t want us to leave him that soon, or maybe ever,” Tzianeng Vang said, “and by leaving, he probably felt like we have—we did not live up to what our responsibilities as a sponsored family should have been to that [church and] to him, personally.” It was for this reason that Tzianeng Vang and the pastor “got disconnected.”¹²

Because many Hmong families like Tzianeng Vang’s hoped to reunited with their relatives as soon as possible, sponsorship relationships were sometimes brief and not very close

¹² Tzianeng Vang, interview, digital recording at part 10.

at all. Cher Moua, for example, had only a brief relationship with his church sponsor in Washington, D.C. He believed that a Lutheran congregation, working through Church World Service, had sponsored his family. However, he spent only one week in Washington, D.C., before his older brother connected with a cousin and uncle in Pittsburgh. Cher and family boarded a bus bound for Pittsburgh within days.¹³

Relationships with sponsors could be brief and also complicated by conflict rooted in cultural misunderstanding or, in the worst circumstances, exploitation. Sua Vu Yang recalled his first days living in the home of his sponsors, who fed her family bread; used to eating rice, she and her family could not stomach American food. “We thought we had made a mistake to come to this country because we had brought our children to a place like this,” she said. “...I could not eat and every time I looked at the food, my tears dropped immediately and I thought I would starve to death.”¹⁴ Conflict related to food led to an incident during which Yia Lee and her siblings ate a bunch of bananas that were not intended for them. Her angry church sponsor, with whom her family was living, “made some kind of physical gesture that my dad didn’t feel comfortable with,” she said. Her father, in response, made preparations to leave the sponsor’s house immediately. “[I]n the middle of the night, that same night, my dad and my brothers, sisters, they were all packed, in the middle of the front yard,” she said with a chuckle. “...And then the sponsor’s husband, he called my uncle and said, ‘tell them it’s the middle of the night! They have to stay until morning.’ So they went back in. They stayed for one more night and

¹³ Cher Moua, interview, digital recording at part 6-7.

¹⁴ Sua Vu Yang, OH 86.11, Oral History Interviews of the Hmong Women's Action Team Oral History Project (Hmoob Thaj Yeeb Oral History Project) 1999-2000, Minnesota Historical Society, transcript, p. 16.

morning and then my sister went and picked them up.”¹⁵ Some sponsors, in Timothy Vang’s opinion, were even “very cruel” to Hmong refugees by not giving them enough food to eat or bringing the children to school.¹⁶ Indeed, instances of “sponsorship breakdown,” while rare, did occur.¹⁷

In general, Hmong refugees, almost universally, expressed gratitude for the churches’ generosity. Again and again, Hmong refugees said that churches were good to them. After the banana breakdown, Yia Lee’s family stayed with another family from the same Baptist congregation that sponsored them; the second family “loved us,” she said.¹⁸ “[My] sponsor took very good care of us,” said Bee Yang, adding, “they loved us very much.”¹⁹ Yong Kaye Moua likened the care of his sponsoring church as similar to the love given by parents “raising a little baby from the beginning.” “We feel very proud that many people are very generous and were able to help us start our new life,” he said. Indeed, that new life, for Yong Kaye Moua and many other Hmong refugees, was a new life in America—and also, in many instances, a new life in Christianity.²⁰

¹⁵ Yia Lee, interview, digital recording at part 4.

¹⁶ Timothy Vang, interview, digital recording at part 3.

¹⁷ North, Lewin, and Wagner, *Kaleidoscope*. Refugee resettlement efforts earlier in the twentieth century placed refugees in exploitative situations. See, for example, Porter, “Defining Public Responsibility in a Global Age.” In researching for this project, however, I did not find any evidence for similar exploitation in the case of Hmong refugee resettlement.

¹⁸ Yia Lee, interview, digital recording at part 4.

¹⁹ Bee Yang, interview, digital recording at part 4.

²⁰ Houa Vue Moua and Yong Kaye Moua, interview, digital recording at part 4.

“The Americans took us to church, so we went”

In their retelling of how they became Christian, many Hmong refugees attributed their adoption of Christianity to their sponsorship by Christian churches and, more broadly, to the religious encounters and relationships initiated by resettlement. Bo Thao’s conversion story typifies this causal narrative. “When we first came, we were sponsored by the churches, so when we arrived here, my parents went to church,” she explained, further noting that her mother and father “were even baptized.”²¹ Other Hmong families noted that they not only became Christian because they were sponsored by churches, but that they also became particular types of Christian and members of the same denomination as their sponsors. Houa Vue Moua, sponsored by Trinity Lutheran Church, was Lutheran and had been since she first arrived in Wisconsin, but when she reflected on her life, she acknowledged that she could have taken an alternative religious path had the sponsorship arrangements been different. “We may have become Baptist people [if we had been sponsored by a Baptist church],” she said, “or if we were sponsored by the Catholic Church, then we would become Catholic, but because we were sponsored by a Lutheran...we became Christian in a Lutheran way.”²²

Some Hmong refugees recalled that their sponsors made earnest efforts to share Christianity with them. Neng Vang recalled how, shortly after a church sponsored the resettlement of her family in Saint Paul in 1989, one church volunteer—whom Neng Vang only

²¹ Bo Thao, interview, transcript, p. 12.

²² Houa Vue Moua and Yong Kaye Moua, interview, digital recording at part 20. Scholars have observed that sponsorship relationships have influenced which denomination Hmong Christians have chosen. See Desan, “A Change of Faith for Hmong Refugees”; Winland, “Christianity and Community,” 33–34.

knew as “sister”—visited the family’s home to talk to them about Christianity. “She gave her a Bible that was written in Hmong, a big one,” recalled Neng Vang’s daughter, Paj Ntaub Lis, and “she was telling my mom and them to go to church.” Neng Vang accepted the Bible and told the sister that she would read through the material and make a decision after some time.²³ In fact, she was reluctant to go to church. “[S]he feels like, coming to America, if someone was sick or something, she felt like she still needed the ancestors to help her,” Paj Ntaub Lis explained.²⁴ The sister’s efforts did not go very far, and the family made no efforts to attend church until a second family from a Lutheran church began to help Neng Vang and her children. In contrast to the first woman who helped them, the second family did not discuss religion at all. Eventually, Paj Ntaub Lis and her siblings casually attended the Lutheran church primarily because they enjoyed the “fun stuff” that the church offered children. Neng Vang, however, did not attend.²⁵

Sponsors did not just ask Hmong refugees to attend church; sometimes, they simply drove to their homes, picked them up, and brought them. “When we came, we found out that it was a Catholic church that had sponsored us, and they, the sponsors, started taking us to church,” recalled Soua Lo. “Yes, after we came to this country we attended church too,” Mai Vang Thao said. “We went to church for about seven to eight years.” At the time of the interview, however, Mai Vang Thao identified her religion as “traditional beliefs.” When asked to explain why she was no longer Christian, she replied, “because we did not like Christianity, and we did not like to go to church.” Pressed to elaborate, she added, “We have always practiced some of our old traditions, even though we were going to church, I think that the old tradition is better.” She only

²³ Neng Vang and Paj Ntaub Lis, interview, digital recording at 53:00-55:00.

²⁴ Ibid., digital recording at 43:00-44:00.

²⁵ Ibid., digital recording at 1:05:00-1:07:00.

attended church because a church had sponsored her. “When we arrived in this country, the Americans took us to church,” she said, “so we went.”²⁶

Having heard of Christianity before, in Laos or in Thailand, some of these Hmong refugees were familiar with the religion of their Christian sponsors, and their pre-migration experiences encouraged them to respond positively to invitations to participate in Christian churches when they had had greater contact with Christianity through congregational sponsorships. Maykao Hang’s father, for example, was more receptive. Her family had practiced indigenous Hmong religion before they arrived in the United States, the family started going to the Lutheran church of their sponsors. “[T]hey encouraged us,” she said. “My dad, he used to listen to people preaching back in Laos and Thailand, so he kind of...believed in the new religion already.” She and her family soon became baptized Lutherans.²⁷ Others, remembering their experiences with missionaries in Asia, were reluctant to go to church. Tzianeng Vang’s parents struggled with going to church, in part because they had had negative encounters with Christian missionaries in Laos and in Thailand. [B]asically, the only memory of church—you know, the mission work—it’s very negative,” he said, adding that “they didn’t feel very, I guess, welcome in the church.”²⁸

Regardless of their previous experience with Christianity, many Hmong refugees often found attending church in the United States to be a bewildering experience. During Houa Vue Mousa’s first experience at church, she felt “tired, drowsy from the high jet,” she said. Having

²⁶ Mai Vang Thao, OH 86.2, Oral History Interviews of the Hmong Women's Action Team Oral History Project (Hmoob Thaj Yeeb Oral History Project) 1999-2000, Minnesota Historical Society, transcript, p. 11.

²⁷ Maykao Hang, interview, transcript, p. 10.

²⁸ Tzianeng Vang, interview, digital recording at part 8.

spent many hours in transcontinental travel, she was exhausted and disoriented. “I did not think about much religion or God or church, I just think about bed, I just need a soft bench to lay down,” she said.²⁹ Soua Lo and her family had had no prior experience with Catholicism before coming to the United States. There, in the church, they watched the other congregants participating in the Mass and followed whatever they did: they held the Bible, they knelt on the risers, they lined up and took Holy Communion. “They led us, and we just follow,” she said. “We just didn’t even know what we were doing.”³⁰ Differences in language were just as important as differences in ritual and belief. Neng Xiong was a practicing Catholic, and she looked forward to attending Mass. “I was excited about going,” she said. “So, you know, seven o’clock every weekend, I would be up and ready to go.” However, she found the services at the Cathedral in Saint Paul to be overwhelmingly confusing because it was all in English. “I really don’t understand what’s going on, and I don’t understand what’s being communicated,” she said. “So, when they stand, I stand; when they sit, I sit; when they go, I go; I just follow them.”³¹

Based on the stories Hmong people told of their experiences of going to church with their sponsors, the intentions of sponsors are difficult to discern. Missionary purposes—what Pearl Jones described as a desire “to introduce them to Jesus” and ensure that they are “saved”—may have motivated sponsors’ decision to bring refugees to church every Sunday. At the same time, sponsors may have brought Hmong refugees to Sunday services with no missionary objectives whatsoever and, instead, may have aimed only to introduce them to a support network, to help them find new friends, and to include them in the life of the church community, as resettlement

²⁹ Houa Vue Moua and Yong Kay Moua, interview, digital recording at part 19.

³⁰ Soua Lo and Shong Yang, interview, digital recording at part 10.

³¹ Neng Xiong, interview, digital recording at part 13.

manuals encouraged sponsors to do. Sponsors may have brought Hmong refugees to church out of a practical desire to raise awareness of refugee issues and to increase financial support from the congregation, as the Refugee Core Committee at Saint Anthony Park Lutheran Church did. In truth, these nuances were often lost on the refugees whom they sponsored. Because of the language barrier, Hmong refugees said that they understood little of what the sponsors told them. “Well, they just speak and we just listen,” Kia Vue said with a laugh. “There’s nothing we can do.”³² All of the pluralistic ideals that sponsors had—that refugees were not required to attend church, that the church’s help was freely given with no expectation of reciprocation through conversion, and that they were free to practice their own religion if they chose to do so—were difficult to communicate when, as Tzianeng Vang said, the only means of talking to one another was through “hand gestures” and “charade games.”³³

Mai Vang Thao’s narrative of her years spent attending a Christian church—as due to the fact that Americans simply brought her to church—suggests that many Hmong people did not see attending church as a choice. Some Hmong refugees did not think that they even had the option not to attend church. A few people did communicate their preferences. Yia Lee, whose family also practiced indigenous Hmong religion, attended church reluctantly with her sponsors. “They took us to church a couple times,” she said, “but it was just not us, so we decided that we didn’t go anymore.”³⁴ But many others, like Tzianeng Vang’s family, were very strongly animist and felt that it was a coercive situation. “With the churches that sponsored us, we didn’t have a

³² Kia Vue, interview, digital recording at part 8.

³³ Tzianeng Vang, interview, digital recording at part 9.

³⁴ Yia Lee, interview, digital recording at part 6.

choice. They sponsored us, so we came every Sunday,” he said. Later, he added, “We didn’t have a choice. He’d just come and put us in his car and took us to church.”³⁵

Adopting Christianity was, in the eyes of some Hmong refugees, a necessary step to becoming American, a requirement for full membership in American society. Perhaps because of their contact with missionaries in Laos and in Thailand, where the association between Christianity and Western culture was strong, some Hmong people arrived believing that conversion to Christianity would help them to fit into their new communities, as Kim Yang’s perspective on Christianity illustrates. “I believe that we need to change, because we are living in a new country that has lots of changes, so we need to change too,” she said.³⁶ Kia Vue explained that she adopted Christianity because she aspired to be American. “[W]e had become part of the people,” she said.³⁷ William Siong observed that, for Hmong people and other refugees, the desire to belong was strong. “[A]t first, when you came here, you want to be like the white people,” he said.³⁸

In addition, Hmong refugees sometimes considered the adoption of Christianity as an act of respect for their sponsors and an obligation arising from the fact that the churches had helped

³⁵ Tzianeng Vang, interview, digital recording at part 8.

³⁶ Kim Yang, interview, transcript, p. 12.

³⁷ Kia Vue, interview, digital recording at part 7.

³⁸ William Siong, interview by the author, September 11, 2012, Saint Paul, Minnesota, digital recording at part 8. Several scholars have identified the desire to be “American” as one of the reasons why Hmong people have adopted Christianity. See, for example, Desan, “A Change of Faith for Hmong Refugees.” In addition, Daphne Winland has argued that Canadian Hmong refugees found that joining Mennonite churches facilitated that adjustment and adaptation to their new society. See Winland, “Revisiting a Case Study of Hmong Refugees and Ontario Mennonites”; Winland, “The Role of Religious Affiliation in Refugee Resettlement”; Winland, “Christianity and Community”; Ong, *Buddha Is Hiding*, 205.

refugee families so generously. As a result of the administrative arrangements that put them in close contact with Christian congregations, many Hmong refugees who were sponsored by congregations participated in Christian churches, a decision arising in part from the belief that participating in churches was an obligation, proper demonstration of respect and reciprocity, even a condition for receiving assistance. For Kia Vue, being resettled by a Catholic parish in Oklahoma was her first experience encountering Catholicism, or any type of Christianity. Her gratitude for the church's help, in combination with the belief that starting her life over in the United States required major change, was why she chose to become Christian. "After the church helped us, we decided—the whole family decided—to be baptized," she said. She emphasized later that her decision was "because this church has helped us."³⁹ Soua Lo, who was already a member of the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church when she arrived in the United States, felt required to attend Mass at the Catholic parish that had sponsored. "From January until April, we were there in Pittsburgh, and we went to a Catholic church because we felt like we had to, because we were sponsored by a Catholic church, and so we felt obligated to go," she said. Like Kia Vue, she saw her participation in the Catholic Church as one of many ways in which she accepted the fact that resettlement required Hmong people to experience a wide variety of changes that they did not necessarily welcome. Like paying taxes or stopping at red stop lights, going to church was simply something new that they were expected to do in America. "We knew that it was different from what we believed, and that it's different from what we are used to in Laos, but we just know we had to do something in ways that we just didn't know," she said.⁴⁰

³⁹ Kia Vue, interview, digital recording at part 7.

⁴⁰ Soua Lo and Shong Yang, interview, digital recording at part 15.

A feeling of indebtedness may have been one reason why Bea Vue Benson's mother became a Lutheran. Bea Vue Benson recalled how her mother, who had been raised in a family with a few relatives who had been "very faithful Christians," was married to a shaman who continued to practice indigenous Hmong religion. "I actually grew up in a very shamanistic family," Bea Vue Benson said. When her mother and sisters arrived in Wisconsin, having been sponsored by Trinity Lutheran Church in Eau Claire, her mother chose to become baptized Lutheran soon after they arrived. Trinity Lutheran had been very generous with the family, which Bea Vue Benson believed shaped her mother's decision. "Financially they [the church] played a very big role," Bea Vue Benson said, "and socially and spiritually played a very integral role in our family."⁴¹ "My mother made the decision to do—for our family to be baptized, for reasons I won't know," she said. "But I'm guessing, I'm only guessing, if maybe she felt obligated to be a part of the community that had sponsored us."⁴²

If her mother felt obligated, Bea Vue Benson's reasons for adopting Christianity were different, though. The central themes in her conversion narrative was not obligation, but gratitude, awe, and admiration. Adopting Christianity, for her, was the product of a warm encounter with Christian kindness and charity:

My story about becoming a Christian—and I have lots of wonderful Christian friends who continue to encourage me and remind me why I'm a Christian—and it's because of the way our church loved us, even as they didn't know who we were, and even as we didn't deserve and didn't earn—we didn't earn this love from Trinity. We didn't. I mean, that's the story of the Christian Gospel. It's grace, and the Lutheran tradition is the story of grace, unearned love, unmerited love. And I do believe that the Gospel proclaims that grace and unmerited love, unearned love and unearned forgiveness. And I think about the Prodigal story, the

⁴¹ Bea Vue Benson, interview by the author, September 5, 2012, Saint Paul, Minnesota, digital recording at part 2.

⁴² Ibid., digital recording at part 1.

son returning home after wasted his resources and having, you know, betrayed his dad, and being received with so much love and forgiveness.

In her view, the love that Trinity Lutheran Church showed her family introduced her to concepts of God's grace and love. "I didn't earn—our family did not earn—their love and support," she said. "They gave it out of their understanding of God's commandment to love their neighbor." The example inspired her. Active in the life of the church throughout her youth, she attended a Lutheran college and, afterward, Luther Seminary, where she would train to become the first Hmong woman to be ordained a Lutheran pastor. Her aspirations for life would come to reflect what she had learned through the generosity and hospitality that Trinity Lutheran Church showed her family when they sponsored them. "I want to live my life and give to people," she said, "...and not think about if they've earned it or not."⁴³

As these diverse conversion narratives reveal, Hmong refugees adopted Christianity for a variety of reasons: a bond of gratitude and obligation, a belief that attending church was the American way, an admiration for a religion that church sponsors represented through their generous and compassionate care. And yet, even in a nation that cherishes religious freedom and autonomy, these individual choices were the product of structural forces and state power. Because the national refugee resettlement system was built on local church sponsorships, many Hmong people met Christians, and Christianity, for the first time. Moreover, because resettlement policies and church sponsorships produced close, dependent relationships, Hmong refugees felt pressures for religious conformity and change, even with sponsors' best efforts to respect and accommodate religious difference.

⁴³ Ibid., digital recording at part 8.

“I hate the word ‘converted’”

Refugee resettlement policies set in motion important religious transformations, although Hmong religious change was far more complex than the simple story of refugees shepherded, willingly or not, into the fold of their sponsors’ churches. Resettlement policies produced contact, but also combination—the exchange of religious ideas and practices that generated religious innovation, borrowing, and, in some cases, conversion, which Hmong people pursued according to their own indigenous religious worldview. Indeed, the structural, sponsorship-centered explanation for Hmong adoption of Christianity covered only those events that unfolded in what Hmong people might refer to as the “seen world.” A more nuanced interpretation of religious change must consider Hmong people’s relationship with the unseen spirit world, which, in traditional Hmong belief, exerts enormous power over daily life. Hmong refugees made the decision to adopt Christianity in the context of a series of resettlement policies that not only facilitated encounters between animist Hmong refugees and Christian sponsors, but also obstructed the practice of indigenous rituals that Hmong people believed were critical to maintaining spiritual and physical health. Without the human or material resources necessary for their indigenous ceremonies, many Hmong refugees found themselves in a troubling ritual void and turned to Christianity as an additional, alternative means of ensuring good health and peaceful relations with the spirit world, as they understood it to operate.

In seeking to understand what might have motivated Hmong refugees to adopt Christianity, one must also consider how Hmong refugees understood Christianity and the act of “converting” or changing religious affiliation in the first place. To be sure, the language of conversion is controversial. In telling of their personal religious histories, many Hmong people

used the language of “convert,” but Cher Moua, a Hmong minister who himself had become a Christian as a young man, stated his frustration with the term vehemently: “I hate the word ‘converted’!” he said.⁴⁴ There were many reasons why he, a Hmong evangelical pastor, may have disliked the term “converted”; such language, for example, emphasized the changes that produced schisms within families and that ran afoul of the beliefs of those who considered the practice of indigenous Hmong religion to be an essential component of Hmong identity. Beyond Cher Moua’s particular complaints, however, describing Hmong Christianity in terms of conversion fails to capture the fact that the religious changes experienced by Hmong refugees was not a simple, bimodal process. Hmong refugees often adopted Christianity selectively and sometimes ambivalently. In a classic case of “indigenous appropriation,” they incorporated Christianity into their preexisting beliefs, practices, and worldviews and applied it to their preexisting spiritual predicaments.⁴⁵ The adoption of Christianity did not necessarily preclude the practice of indigenous Hmong rituals; instead, for many Hmong people, religion was often additive, rather than exclusive. The adoption of Christianity merged past and present, and Hmong people straddled religious boundaries that were not clearly defined and often contested. Being Christian and being “traditional”—one common label for people who practice indigenous Hmong religion—often involved overlapping, rather than discrete, religious beliefs, practices, and identities.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Cher Moua, interview, digital recording at part 14.

⁴⁵ Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations*, 56.

⁴⁶ “Part of the reason for the misapprehensions concerning religious differences is the assumption that religious change is unidirectional—from the missionary to the missionized,” argued Daphne Winland. “This process is thus frequently portrayed as unbalanced process with exotic ‘Other’ capitulating to the forces of modernity.” Her research on Hmong Mennonites

Becoming Christian no doubt involved significant change for Hmong people. In fact, the decision to adopt Christianity was motivated at times by a plain intention to break with the past. Keith Vang, for example, recalled that, for his family, becoming Christian offered a welcome opportunity to be released from traditional obligations and to “leave the old ways” that had been troubling them. Sponsored by Ascension Lutheran Church in Lansing, Michigan, Keith Vang recalled how his father was no longer interested in serving as a shaman, but worried that “the shaman spirit would not leave him.” Christianity, he believed, would give him access to “a higher power”; other people, he saw, “had accepted Christ, and their lives had changed.” For Keith Vang’s father and for other Hmong people who became Christian in Laos and Thailand, adopting Christianity solved a spiritual dilemma—in this case, the desire to be released from the responsibilities of serving as a shaman and the fear that “the shaman spirit” that inhabited and empowered him would unleash powerful repercussions if he ceased his practice. That Christianity proffered “a higher power” that might protect him from the consequences of the shaman spirit encouraged him to become a baptized Lutheran. For Keith Vang’s father, as for many others, Christianity held the potential to solve spiritual problems.⁴⁷

indicated that Hmong religious change was “a complex and multi-dimensional process,” and that it was necessary “to investigate how and in what ways they reconciled their new faith with the old.” Her argument coincided with other scholars who have studied indigenous appropriation of Christianity. See Winland, “Revisiting a Case Study of Hmong Refugees and Ontario Mennonites,” 175. For other discussion of indigenous appropriation and Hmong Christianity, see Winland, “Christianity and Community”; Winland, “The Role of Religious Affiliation in Refugee Resettlement”; Tapp, “The Impact of Missionary Christianity upon Marginalized Ethnic Minorities.”

⁴⁷ Keith Vang, interview by Paul Hillmer, Hmong Oral History Project, Concordia University, transcript, accessed January 18, 2014, http://homepages.csp.edu/hillmer/Interviews/Keith_Vang.html.

What precisely changed when Hmong people became Christian depended on which denomination Hmong converts joined. The Christian and Missionary Alliance, the denomination that today counts the most number of Hmong Christian members, has forbidden many practices associated with indigenous Hmong religion. Timothy Vang, a Hmong pastor at the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church in Maplewood, explained that he believed that Hmong Christians should abstain from participating in many traditional rituals because such practices constituted demon worship:

So most of the things that the Hmong people do really are non-Christian. 80-90% of what they that they claim to be culture, it's not pure culture—it always relates to demons. That is why when a Hmong who becomes Christian is cut off. He either has to separate himself, or if he goes back to them, anything that he participates will involve demons.⁴⁸

Seeing indigenous Hmong religion as a form of slavery rooted in “the fear of demons or torture from demons,” Timothy Vang considered Hmong people to be “like prisoners in Satan’s prison,” held “captive in that kind of belief and fear.”⁴⁹ In addition, he considered Hmong religion to be “a very primitive form of religion” and animism, more generally, to be “the most primitive form of religious practice on earth.” In contrast, he said, “Christianity is the most scientific, reasonable belief system in any religion.”⁵⁰ Cher Moua, a Hmong pastor at an evangelical church in Saint Paul, offered a slightly different approach to the question of whether indigenous Hmong religion was compatible with Christianity, but he arrived at the same conclusion that there was no place

⁴⁸ Timothy Vang, interview, digital recording at part 11.

⁴⁹ Ibid., digital recording at part 10. Many evangelical Christians believe that *dab*, or the spirits central to indigenous Hmong religion, are malevolent and equivalent to demons or the devil, although this interpretation of *dab* may be a recent development due to contact with Christian missionaries. According to Dia Cha, Hmong people did not consider *dab*, or spirits, to be fundamentally evil until Christian missionaries introduced that interpretation. See Dia Cha, interview, transcript.

⁵⁰ Timothy Vang, interview, digital recording at part 9-10.

for the practice of traditional Hmong rituals in the lives of faithful Hmong Christians. “[T]he Bible clearly says we need to be careful for us to discern what is physical, what is spiritual,” he said. “Anything that is associated with spiritual conflict, we need to understand, we need to discern, we need to advise people against participating.”⁵¹

Like their pastors, lay Hmong Christians in theologically conservative denominations such as the Christian and Missionary Alliance often shared the belief that Christianity was incompatible with indigenous Hmong religion. Tzianeng Vang, who grew up in an animist family but spent much of his adulthood as a member of the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church, likened conversion to Christianity to a “sworn-in citizenship process” in which “there’s no if and but” about leaving indigenous Hmong religion behind.⁵² Devout evangelical Hmong Christians such as True Xiong described practitioners of indigenous Hmong religion to be “enslaved” to demons.⁵³ Similarly, Bee Yang found the idea of maintaining indigenous Hmong religion to be morally repugnant. “The thought of going back is not even as big as a hair strand,” she declared. The costly traditional Hmong rituals had brought no peace to her life, she explained, but only suffering. “Enough is enough,” she said, “and I’m just really sick and tired of it, and I just don’t want to have anything to do with it anymore.”⁵⁴ She believed that visiting a shaman or conducting a soul-calling ceremony contradicted the teachings of the Bible. “I believe that [practicing traditional Hmong rituals] is a sin because the Bible said so, and the Spirit of

⁵¹ Cher Moua, interview, digital recording at part 13.

⁵² Tzianeng Vang, interview, digital recording at part 12.

⁵³ True Xiong, interview, digital recording at part 5.

⁵⁴ Bee Yang, interview, digital recording at part 9.

God speaks to my heart, that it is a sin,” she said. She later added, for emphasis, “If you force me to go back, I would rather die.”⁵⁵

Hmong conversion to Christianity, however, involved as much continuity as it did change. Although in some ways a break with the past, the embrace of “the new way” was an adaptation that allowed for the preservation of other elements of Hmong belief, practice, culture, and identity and a source of stability amid the immense social, cultural, economic, and political dislocations of refugee resettlement. Hmong churches, like other immigrant religious institutions, were what Chia Youyee Vang described as “a nexus of their negotiation between the old and the new.”⁵⁶

For one, churches functioned as an extension of, or even a replacement for, family and ethnic community, and becoming Christian was thus an enterprise of finding a network of material and spiritual support. Mao Yang, for instance, said that she attended church regularly because, in her small town, she had no immediate family and found valuable support through her clan, which, in her area, was primarily churchgoing.⁵⁷ In contrast, Yia Lee had significantly more positive feelings about attending church, but her reasons for attending were similar. The church offers “very supporting people” who are “very loving and caring” she said.⁵⁸ For Yia Lee, though, the appeal of having a new church family was only part of the reason for her to go to church; the lack of relatives was another reason, as the practice of indigenous Hmong religion was difficult without relatives. “My husband has no brothers, sisters, so he’s the only one, and

⁵⁵ Ibid., digital recording at part 10.

⁵⁶ Vang, *Hmong America*, 94.

⁵⁷ Mao Yang, interview, digital recording at 54:00-57:00.

⁵⁸ Yia Lee, interview, digital recording at part 10.

that is one of the reasons why we converted,” she said, “because in the old tradition, you have to have helping hands.”⁵⁹

Adopting Christianity was also an enterprise of maintaining ties to the Hmong ethnic community. Hmong Christian churches, much like other immigrant churches in the United States, functioned as important community institutions and sites for reproducing Hmong identity, building ethnic cohesion, and providing mutual assistance.⁶⁰ Many Hmong Christians preferred to join Hmong congregations, such as Timothy Vang’s church, or participate in dedicated Hmong language services and ministries supported by mainstream congregations, such as the Hmong Catholic ministries associated with the Archdiocese of Minneapolis and Saint Paul. Hmong Christians cherished these church programs as opportunities to befriend other Hmong people and participate in the broader Hmong community. Mao Yang recalled that, even if she was unenthusiastic about Christianity as a religion, she regularly attended church services at the Hmong Baptist church in the small town where she was resettled because church participation provided the only opportunities for her to connect with other Hmong people. If she did not go to church on Sundays, she said, she would not have been able to see Hmong people at all, a possibility that deeply saddened her.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Ibid., digital recording at part 9.

⁶⁰ Vang, *Hmong America*, 78–88; Winland, “Christianity and Community,” 33–41; Winland, “The Role of Religious Affiliation in Refugee Resettlement,” 106–107. Several scholars have demonstrated that religious institutions are important sites of ethnic community formation and of preservation and reformulation of ethnic identity. See, for example, Chen, *Getting Saved in America*; Prema Kurien, *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007); Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street*; Levitt, *The Transnational Villagers*; Jay Dolan, *The Immigrant Church: New York’s Irish and German Catholics, 1815-1865* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); Handlin, *The Uprooted*.

If churches, as institutions, served as valuable sites for maintaining Hmong community ties, Christianity, as a religion, also offered opportunities to maintain ties to their religious and cultural traditions. Indeed, Christianity was not simply “the new way”; Hmong people, adopting Christianity on their own terms, found many parallels between core concepts in indigenous Hmong religion and Christianity. In her study of Hmong Mennonites in Ontario, Daphne Winland observed that Christian notions of sacrifice appealed to Hmong people for whom ritual oblations had been a traditional way of showing respect to ancestors and other spiritual entities. She also observed that Hmong Mennonites understood Jesus as a liberator, one who not only saved them from the bondage of sin, but also bondage from evil spirits known as *tlan*.⁶² Houa Vue Moua, for her part, found abundant similarities in religious symbols and ritual practices between animism and Lutheran Christianity: the Christmas wreath, she said, resembled the bamboo ring that Hmong people have traditionally made during the New Year; Easter eggs reminded her of the eggs that Hmong people have typically understood as symbols of peace, benevolent spirits, and good health; the Christian cross was similar to a design Hmong women have long sewn into their embroidery and a gesture that Hmong people made when they desired protection from evil spirits during a journey; Thanksgiving corresponded to Hmong New Year, a celebration of the harvest. Even the chants of the *hu plig*, the traditional Hmong soul-calling ceremony, were “like a hymn in the Bible.” All of these similarities, Houa Vue Moua said, made her feel “comfortable” in Christianity, but also at home in indigenous Hmong religion, the rituals of which did not trouble her, as they did for Hmong evangelical Christians. Unlike Bee Yang,

⁶¹ Mao Yang, interview, digital recording at 45:00-46:00.

⁶² Winland, “Revisiting a Case Study of Hmong Refugees and Ontario Mennonites,” 174.

who stated that she preferred dying over practicing Hmong animism, Houa Vue Moua was open to participating in indigenous rituals. “I don’t see anything wrong,” she said.⁶³

That Houa Vue Moua did not consider her participation in a *hu plig* to be at odds with her life as a devout Lutheran reveals another important dimension of continuity amid Hmong religious transformations: ritual practices often remained the same. Although some Hmong Christians considered indigenous Hmong religion to be sinful and “demon”-centered, others continued to practice indigenous Hmong religion even as they identified as devout Christians, held Christian beliefs, and participated actively in Christian churches. Obscured by the culture clash narrative of Hmong conversion from “primitive” Hmong animism to “new” Christianity, as well as by dramatic stories of family schisms over religious differences, is the fact that, in practice, Hmong ritual practices straddled religious boundaries. Anne Fadiman discovered the hybridity and multiplicity of Hmong religious life when she was investigating Hmong religious life in Merced. As she recounted,

Animal sacrifices are common, even among Christian converts, a fact I first learned when May Ying Xiong told me that she would be unavailable to interpret one weekend because her family was sacrificing a cow to safeguard her niece during an upcoming open-heart operation. When I said, ‘I didn’t know your family was so religious,’ she replied, ‘Oh yes, we’re Mormon.’⁶⁴

Similarly, Bea Vue Benson recalled how her own mother, who was baptized into the Lutheran church shortly after she was resettled in Wisconsin, sustained a commitment to indigenous Hmong religion, particularly the beliefs and rituals associated with death and the afterlife. As she

⁶³ Houa Vue Moua and Yong Kaye Moua, interview, digital recording at part 17.

⁶⁴ Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, 208; Shone Yang and Vicki Xiong in Faderman, *I Begin My Life All Over*, 114–118. Similarly, Daphne Winland encountered Hmong Mennonites who continued to practice shamanism, although they preferred not to discuss the fact that they maintained these traditional practices. See Winland, “Christianity and Community,” 22; Winland, “The Role of Religious Affiliation in Refugee Resettlement,” 111.

neared the end of her life, she requested a traditional Hmong funeral rather than a Christian burial. “In fact, my mother passed away and explicitly—*explicitly*—asked that she be buried in the traditional Hmong animistic way,” Bea Vue Benson recalled. In keeping with the request, Bea Vue Benson and her family organized a Hmong funeral, during which they burned paper money and invited “Hmong traditional ritual experts” who played the *qeej* and performed “the chanting to guide her spirit back to the ancestral world.” Lasting seventy-two hours, the funeral was no small investment, but Bea Vue Benson respected her mother’s decision and understood why the funeral was so important to her. “Because my father was a shaman,” she said, her mother “didn’t think that she could be reunited with him if she were buried the Christian way.” In addition, “she wanted to be reunited with my ancestors, who were not Christians, so we honored her wish.” As this story reveals, Hmong Christians often did not abandon a religious worldview rooted in Hmong animism nor discard its most important practices. That Bea Vue Benson’s mother turned to familiar Hmong traditions at a time in her life when she felt that she needed them most—when her soul was ready to be reunited with her ancestors—was testimony to her enduring commitment to indigenous Hmong religion and its rituals.

The decision to continue indigenous practices—whether it was guiding the soul of the deceased with a *qeej* or healing the sick with a *hu plig*—may have correlated in part with the particular Christian denomination and theology to which Hmong converts subscribed. Bea Vue Benson’s approach to these issues reflects that fact that, in contrast to Hmong Christians active in Baptist and Christian and Missionary Alliance congregations, she, along with other Hmong Lutherans, emphasized the need to “be respectful of Hmong folks who are not Christian” and refused to “separate” herself from others. As an ordained Lutheran minister who also had many relatives who were not Christian, Bea Vue Benson did not consider her participation in

indigenous rituals to be a sin, but an expression of her commitment to inclusive and loving relationships with her family and community. “I want to be respectful,” she said, “and I’m not one of those Hmong Christians who feel very strongly that I can’t participate in a meal where a Hmong ritual, a Hmong shamanistic or traditional ritual has been performed, like a spirit-calling ritual or a meal where a shaman has been called to perform a healing ceremony. I don’t exclude myself from those [rituals and] from my participation in those ceremonies because I really do believe in a God that’s bigger than rules and rituals.”⁶⁵ Indeed, some Hmong Christians may have chosen particular denominations over others because of this more inclusive stance. Kia Vue, for example, preferred the Catholic Church because it offered a more accommodating space for indigenous practices. “I like the Catholic Church more because they’re not so strict,” she said. “...When were in the Catholic Church, I think it was still okay. I didn’t hear anything as far as restricting us from practicing.”⁶⁶ Chue Ying Vang, the first Hmong American Catholic priest, incorporated traditional ceremonies into his ordination ceremony, such as the presentation of eggs, a sign of good luck, and the tying of strings around wrists, which, according to traditional religious belief, prevents the release of spirits but in this context was seen as another emblem of good luck.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Bea Vue Benson, interview, digital recording at part 10.

⁶⁶ Kia Vue, interview, digital recording at part 14.

⁶⁷ Wendy Tai, “Hmong Families Torn By Collision of Old and New,” *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, February 8, 1993. Sucheng Chan also observed that Catholic Hmong people were more likely to continue to practice indigenous Hmong religion, whereas conservative Protestant Hmong people were more likely to renounce it; see Chan, “Hmong Means Free,” 55. A Catholic Hmong New Year celebration in 1982 at Saint Michael Parish in Providence, Rhode Island, indicates that Catholic worship services incorporated Hmong language and Hmong traditional song. For a full recording of this Catholic Hmong New Year celebration is available in the Amy Catlin files, Ethnomusicology Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

Underlying this accommodating stance is the belief that Christianity and animism were not mutually exclusive, but different ways of honoring God and participating in God's creation. Moreover, Hmong Catholics and Lutherans saw less friction between Christianity and indigenous Hmong religion because they considered many indigenous rituals to be an expression of Hmong culture, rather than a demon-centered religion. "Ultimately, I do believe in a God that's much bigger than what we make God to be," Bea Vue Benson said, "and that God can accept, and that God is really okay with me participating in a Hmong traditional shamanistic ritual, and that I'm not going to be condemned to Hell if I participate in it." Her understanding of God as "bigger than any religion" and as accepting and inclusive was why she chose to carry out her mother's request to have a "traditional shamanistic funeral." She believed that her mother would be "still accepted by God." On this point, Bea Vue Benson found inspiration in Romans 8:38-39, in which Paul wrote, "For I am persuaded that neither death nor life nor angels nor empires nor armies nor things present nor things to come nor height nor depth nor anything else created shall be able to separate me from the love of God, which is in Jesus Christ our Lord." Bea Vue Benson loved this passage and took its message "very seriously." The passage means that "nothing, not even shamanism, can separate me from the love of God, or anyone else from the love of God," she said.⁶⁸

While Bea Vue Benson emphasized God's bigness, other people found other idioms to express a similar theology. Her sister, Houa Vue Moua, explained how Christianity compared to indigenous Hmong religion by referring to the different ways to pay highway fares. "We feel like becoming Christian is like iPass to go to heaven," she explained. "...[I]f you were to ask me,

⁶⁸ Bea Vue Benson, interview, digital recording at part 10.

between Christian and non-Christian, what is the difference, I would say, exactly just like the highway I-94 or I-90, that you pay iPass, or pay token.” Indigenous Hmong religion, she said, required that “you stop and make a long line,” but Christianity was like having an automated pass—“like we’re already registered to God.”⁶⁹ However, on the matter of whether one holds an iPass or pays by token, she believed that God and the ultimate destination of mankind—heaven—remained the same. Such an understanding of Christianity and indigenous Hmong religion as different routes to the same God sounded similar chords of pluralism expressed some Christian church sponsorship.

That many Hmong Christians continued to practice indigenous rituals points to a further, fundamental continuity that complicates the discourse of “conversion”: Hmong worldviews, religious imaginations, and understanding of their spiritual landscape remained the same. Stories of Hmong religious change suggest that, for many Hmong Christian converts, a fundamental understanding of the spiritual realm, rooted in indigenous Hmong religion, shaped how Hmong people conceptualized Christianity and informed their decision to convert, which they did on their own terms. Christianity appealed to them because it offered a new way to manage old spirits and to abide by the rules of the unseen spirit world as they had always understood it.⁷⁰ Put another way, Hmong people continued to reside in the same spiritual landscape, and Christianity provided a new means of facilitating harmonious relations with its spiritual inhabitants, whose disfavor caused a variety of calamities, especially sickness. Such an understanding of

⁶⁹ Houa Vue Moua and Yong Kaye Moua, interview, digital recording at part 15.

⁷⁰ Even if many Hmong Christians renounced the practice of ancestor worship and other indigenous Hmong rituals, many continued to believe in traditional spirits and to maintain animist beliefs. See Winland, “Revisiting a Case Study of Hmong Refugees and Ontario Mennonites,” 174.

Christianity had already compelled hundreds of Hmong people in Laos and Thailand to seek baptism, and this rational and pragmatic approach to weighing religious options to ensure health and well being endured in the United States, when contact with Christianity increased. Some scholars have argued that Christianity appealed to refugees because it offered an explanation for the tragedy and suffering Hmong people experienced during wartime, refugee migration, and resettlement.⁷¹ Although Christianity did bring solace and peace to many Hmong converts, it also offered Hmong people a means of actively coping with suffering when indigenous Hmong religion was neither effective nor available as a means of solving sickness or other spiritual problems.

Hmong conversion narratives, which typically centered on experiences of sickness and healing, thus consistently emphasize how Christianity functioned as a new and useful spiritual solution for pressing, practical problems facing Hmong refugees in the United States. Traditionally believing that sickness was not simply a bodily problem, but a spiritual problem often due to the loss of a soul, Hmong people approached Christianity as a replacement for healing rituals central to indigenous Hmong religion. Yia Lee pointed to her mother-in-law's sickness as the reason she and her husband became Christian:

She was so sick, and we did everything we could. The doctor couldn't find any help for her. Religion-wise, didn't help her. We did everything that we know how, didn't work, so, finally, she had a brother, he has a brother, that is a pastor right now. She wanted him to come and help her. He came, and that's how we became Christian. That's how we converted.⁷²

She added that it was challenging to practice indigenous healing rituals because they involved animal sacrifice, sometimes inside the house, and that it was frustrating to depend on a shaman to

⁷¹ Winland, "Revisiting a Case Study of Hmong Refugees and Ontario Mennonites"; Ong, *Buddha Is Hiding*.

⁷² Yia Lee, interview, digital recording at part 7.

conduct healing rituals. In contrast, Christianity offered a more direct approach for requesting divine intervention in times of illness. “I know that I can talk to God straight,” she said, “and God will heal me, or I can tell God what I feel.”⁷³ Like Yia Lee, Mary Her believed that becoming Christian would help her to solve the multiple health problems that had plagued her and her family. After she resettled in the United States, she began to go to church, where she prayed for healing—and soon, she said, her “eyes started healing.”⁷⁴ “The mercy of God is very strong; he’s very powerful,” she explained, “so going to church helps me, gives me the energy, and helps me overcome all my sickness because I’ve been a very sick person all my life.” She believed that, had she become Christian earlier in her life, her entire family would have survived. “It’s because I didn’t know God earlier,” she said, “and that’s the reason my children died.”⁷⁵ Reflecting on her Christian friends and family members and their decisions to attend church, Neng Vang observed that most people adopted Christianity “because people get sick, and they’re looking for other ways” to be healed.⁷⁶

Hmong people also turned to Christianity when they believed that malevolent spirits were tormenting them. PaMang Her, for example, recalled that a member of his congregation “was possessed by a spirit” and eventually converted to Christianity to rid himself of troubling spirit. PaMang Her, a pastor, visited to pray with the man, and the next day, he said, “the spirit left him

⁷³ Ibid., digital recording at part 9.

⁷⁴ Mary Her, interview by the author, translated by Maile Vue, August 1, 2012, Saint Paul, Minnesota, digital recording at part 14. Name has been changed at the request of the interview narrator.

⁷⁵ Ibid., digital recording at part 18.

⁷⁶ Neng Vang and Paj Ntaub Lis, interview, digital recording at 1:13:00-1:14:00.

alone,” which was a “sign from God.”⁷⁷ True Xiong also said that, since her childhood, a “bad spirit” had followed her, even after she left Laos and resettled in the United States. She became a Catholic and, later, a member of an Assemblies of God church in order to “have freedom away from the bad spirit.” Her parents, who had been shamans in Laos, had not been able to help her, she said, nor were the Catholic priests able to rid her of the demon. Only later, when she became a born again believer and a member of the Assemblies of God did she believe that she had access to “that power to help me, to release me away from that bad spirit.” She was adamant that Christianity offered a unique power that allowed her to overcome her lifetime of spiritual and bodily afflictions. At the same time, she understood why many of her relatives continued to practice indigenous Hmong religion—none of them were ever as sick as she. “It doesn’t matter because for them who are not sick, they’re not going to go seek it, and so it’s okay,” she said. True Xiong, in contrast, identified herself as a “person who needs medical attention” and one who needs “medical help.” For one who practiced indigenous Hmong religion, needing “medical attention” meant needing the services of a shaman; in True Xiong’s case, when a shaman could not solve her problem, seeking “medical attention” meant seeking a Christian pastor instead.⁷⁸ Indeed, her willingness to try and compare different solutions to address the spiritual origins of her sickness resembled the evidence-based medicine advocated by today’s medical

⁷⁷ PaMang Her, interview, transcript.

⁷⁸ True Xiong, interview, digital recording at part 21. Similarly, Zai Xiong believed that becoming Mormon was the reason that he was able to regain his hearing, from 50 percent loss to only 15% loss. However, in his retelling of his conversion experience, he explained that, after much praying, he received a message from God that he seek the help of a Western medical doctor, rather than that of a shaman. In this sense, adoption of Christian beliefs and practices facilitated the adoption of Western medicine. See Zai Xiong in Faderman, *I Begin My Life All Over*, 121–122.

establishment, except that in True Xiong's case, she was practicing evidence-based religion *and* medicine.

If Christianity appealed to Hmong refugees such as True Xiong because indigenous Hmong religion had proven to be ineffective, it also appealed to Hmong refugees who believed that indigenous Hmong religion would no longer be feasible in the United States. In the absence of shamans and relatives with ritual expertise, adopting Christianity seemed to be the best and most immediate option for those who felt spiritually vulnerable. Mao Yang confessed to being reluctant about being Christian, but then wondered what she would do if she or a family member became ill. "Who am going to go get?" she said. "There's no shamans I could go pursue, so I just thought I'd go to church."⁷⁹

"I believe in the traditional religion as well as the new religion"

As these stories show, Hmong conversion to Christianity did not involve abandonment of indigenous Hmong religion as it did the acquisition of Christian beliefs and practices that solved spiritual problems. Moreover, Hmong religious change complicated bimodal notions of religious conversion in that Hmong people sometimes changed religious affiliation multiple times. If the Hmong were famous for being highly migratory in both Asia and the United States, they were also frequent religious migrants who crossed and recrossed religious borders throughout their lives and traveled between Christianity and animism as circumstances changed. The adoption of Christianity upon resettlement in the United States was one of many religious changes in the life

⁷⁹ Mao Yang, interview, digital recording at 33:00-34:00.

of Hmong individuals who might convert and reconvert again and again. Religious identities were far from fixed or static.

Family and community obligations were two circumstances that often precipitated reaffiliation. At times, marriage and parental obligations encouraged some people to adopt Christianity. Marriages between two people of different religious backgrounds precipitated religious change. “Before I married my husband, I was not a Christian,” said Kim Yang, “but after I married my husband, I am a Christian.” Kia Vue and Mao Yang also adopted Christianity because of their spouses, although some women admitted that they were not entirely comfortable with the change.⁸⁰ Marriage also encouraged religious change in the other direction. Bao Yang, for example, explained, “Before I got married, we went to church and believed in God, but I married my husband, and they still practice the traditional religion.” She followed suit.⁸¹ Women typically followed the lead of their spouses, a decision encouraged by the Hmong tradition of women joining their husbands’ family after marriage and by the Christian Biblical teaching that wives should submit to their husbands, the head of the family. “Whatever religion my husband is, that’s what I am, as a girl,” said Yia Lee. “...So whatever he decides, that’s where you go.”⁸² Some women, however, believed both. “[N]ow that I am married to my husband, and he is a

⁸⁰ Kia Vue, interview, part 14; Mao Yang, interview, digital recording at 8:00-10:00, 25:00-29:00.

⁸¹ Bao Vang, OH 86.16, Oral History Interviews of the Hmong Women's Action Team Oral History Project (Hmoob Thaj Yeeb Oral History Project) 1999-2000, Minnesota Historical Society, transcript, p. 10.

⁸² Yia Lee, interview, digital recording at part 7.

Lutheran, so I've changed, I have to practice Christianity," said Maykao Yang, "but...I believe in the traditional religion as well as the new religion."⁸³

Parents also influenced children's religious choices. "At one point, I was thinking about converting to the Lutheran faith and talked to my parents about it," said Pacyinz Lyfoung, "and they were not supportive, so I've decided not to at this time, and since then I just haven't thought about it again."⁸⁴ Timothy Vang observed that prospective members of his church postponed the decision to become Christian out of respect for the wishes of their parents. "They would say," he recounted, "'Well, we still practice animism because our parents are still alive, but when they are gone, we have to go to church. We are tired of doing these things, and we would like to change.'"⁸⁵

Because family members are traditionally instrumental in the practice of indigenous Hmong religion meant that the religious choices of relatives often influenced whether or not other family members became Christian. As a result, religious change often produced significant family conflict when family members disagreed about which religion they should practice. "My children want to be 'Christianity,' but I still want to believe the spirit," said Yang Cha Ying. "There is a lot of controversy about this. I am worried day and night. For me, I want my children to do the same thing as I do, but they never do. They adapt the American culture." Although the conflict about religion was for him real and unresolved, he had already made some accommodations. "We have learned to celebrate Christmas, because our children like it," he said.

⁸³ Maykao Hang, interview, transcript, p. 10.

⁸⁴ Pacyinz Lyfoung, OH 86.13, Oral History Interviews of the Hmong Women's Action Team Oral History Project (Hmoob Thaj Yeeb Oral History Project) 1999-2000, Minnesota Historical Society, transcript, p. 10.

⁸⁵ Timothy Vang, interview, digital recording at part 9.

“So we have adapted to it. We have a tree and presents for our children.”⁸⁶ It was a small accommodation, but part of a larger problem: many Hmong families found themselves torn apart when one member of the family became Christian. In the eyes of many Hmong Christians, particularly evangelicals, conversion to Christianity necessitated separating oneself from all the trappings of animism, especially life-cycle rituals that involved significant family participation. To leave indigenous Hmong religion, Cher Moua said, often meant that new Christians “leave brothers, sisters, parents, children behind,” and that this “spiritual separation” produced “a hostile relationship for a period of time.”⁸⁷ The possibility of family separation angered parents who expected their sons to conduct important rituals on their behalf. When William Siong converted to Christianity, his father, who was still living in Asia, announced that he had “betrayed” the family and sent his son cassette tapes with furious messages. “He said that, ‘If I know that you’re going to convert to Christianity, your mom and I would not raise you up in the first place!’” William Siong recalled. Only a teenager at the time, he remembered the event as being “very, very painful.” “Many nights that I was crying,” he said, “and didn’t know the future will be like because my father no longer want me to be his son...because of the religion thing.”⁸⁸

Beyond family, community obligations also shaped religious decisions. Keith Vang’s father, a shaman, became a Lutheran after being sponsored by a Lutheran church and after a series of spiritual troubles led him to believe that he should no longer practice indigenous Hmong religion. However, when word circulated among the Hmong refugees living in his town

⁸⁶ Yang Cha Ying, Oral History Interviews of the Hmong Oral Histories Project, 1991-1993, Minnesota Historical Society, transcript, p. 4.

⁸⁷ Cher Moua, interview, digital recording at part 13.

⁸⁸ William Siong, interview, digital recording at part 2.

that he was a shaman, he felt compelled to return to practicing indigenous Hmong religion out of a sense of community responsibility. As Keith Vang recalled, “when more Hmong people came to Lansing, and they knew that he was a shaman back in the days, they came and begged and begged him.” His father, wearing the large cross given to him by the Lutheran church, informed the visitors that he was now Christian and no longer practicing as a shaman. One visitor, who “doesn't know anything about being a Christian,” continued to plead for help. “My father was always a kind person,” said Keith Vang, “[and] he decided, ‘Well, maybe one time will be OK. But maybe just this once.’” He performed the ritual but “felt the shaman spirit wasn't with him anymore,” which caused him to say, “OK, maybe this is becoming something that I can't just hide behind the church anymore.” In his home, he built an altar, essential for shamans to communicate with spirits, and, as Keith Vang recalled, “when we had bible study they would cover the altar.”

Conflict arose when the obligations to the Hmong community conflicted with the obligations to his new Christian community. Keith Vang's father later approached the pastor, who may not have been familiar with Hmong shamanism, to ask if he sanctioned the practice of the rituals. The priest asked, “Are you doing something to harm someone or is it something good?” to which the shaman replied that the rituals were, indeed, good. “And the pastor, without realizing what my father was doing, said, ‘It's OK. If it's good, it's OK,’” said Keith Vang. Afterward, when he learned more about Hmong shamanism, the Lutheran pastor announced that he disapproved of the ceremonies. “And then they took my parents to church and they talked to them about taking down the altar and really just being Christians, sticking to the word of God,” Keith Vang recalled. “And during this time there were a lot of Hmong people in Lansing already. A lot of people had a lot of expectations of my father and he decided with the pastor...I felt he

was pressured into taking down the altar.” Keith Vang, believing that his father was happy about the decision, assisted in dismantling the altar. He understood that he had committed what Hmong people considered a grave error only later, when his sister-in-law arrived and said, “Do you guys know that if you do this the shaman spirit is going to attack my father?” Keith Vang saw that his father, aware of the risks to his spirit and his health, was “scared to death” and “traumatized”; he later “experienced a lot of sickness.” Meanwhile, the pastor offered little help in return. “[W]e didn't have the support from the church,” Keith Vang said. “They didn't come to pray for him.” Abandoned and alone, his family felt disappointed in the pastor and the church, as it failed to fulfill one of the most fundamental obligations that Hmong people had long prioritized: a community of people who could conduct ritual practices—a soul-calling, perhaps, but in this case, intercessory prayer—that assisted a friend or family member in times of spiritual trouble and vulnerability.⁸⁹ In this regard, it was the church that had committed a grave sin.

“Which one can protect my family?”

In the end, several fundamental characteristics of Hmong religious life shaped the ways in which Hmong refugees interpreted and experienced religious change as they encountered Christianity during their resettlement in the United States. To begin, religion, for Hmong people, was not simply what one believed, but what one did. Indigenous Hmong religion, like other indigenous traditions, is a practice-oriented religion, in which ritual matters as much as, if not more than, belief and personal conscience; this particular understanding of religion shaped how

⁸⁹ Keith Vang, interview, transcript.

Hmong people adopted Christianity and negotiated their newly acquired beliefs and practices with their preexisting indigenous ones. For people like May Ying Xiong, the young Mormon woman whose family sacrificed animals for rituals to help sick relatives, ritual offered Hmong people rich opportunity to express their religious hybridity and their dual commitments to both Christianity and Hmong animism. At the same time, religious practice was at the center of intense controversy; many of the religious rifts that Hmong people discussed focused less on heretical belief and more on the sinfulness or spiritual error of particular acts, whether it was participating in a soul-calling ceremony, going to church, visiting a shaman, or praying. In sum, religious practice mattered to Hmong people because practice *was* religion. As Vincent Her has argued, Hmong people “place as much emphasis on ‘practice’ (ways of doing) as on beliefs, if not more so.” Because Hmong people have equated their indigenous household rituals to the Western idea of religion, participation in any ritual act, whether Christian or indigenous, has communicated adherence and commitment to a greater degree than self-applied labels and proclamations of belief and faith.⁹⁰

If Hmong people did not just believe in a religion, but did a religion, they also expected religion to do things for them. In this sense, Hmong people understood the purposes of religion somewhat differently from how their Christian American sponsors did: they expected religious rituals and beliefs to offer direction intervention in their lives and immediate help with real-life, practical problems, especially sickness. In contrast to Christianity’s emphasis on salvation in the afterlife, indigenous Hmong religion involved ritual negotiations with spirits that, when successful, brought direct benefit to its practitioners in this world. Hmong people approached Christianity with a similar expectation and believed that the value of a religion’s rituals lay in the

⁹⁰ Her, “Hmong Cosmology: Proposed Model, Preliminary Insights,” 1; Winland, “Christianity and Community,” 24.

degree to which they were efficacious; empirical evidence of its utility in solving real problems offered visible proof of a religion's power and a reason to adopt a new religion or maintain the status quo. To Kia Vue, the preference to practice indigenous Hmong religion over Christianity was not rooted in cultural pride, but in pragmatism. "This has helped us," she said, "and so that's why we continue to do this."⁹¹ Religion offered its practitioners help in a number of ways. See Lee, who said that her "religion is still the old tradition," suffered from infertility and turned to indigenous Hmong religion for help. "I didn't have any children," she said. "I thought I would not have any babies. Due to my religious belief, my husband asked a spiritual doctor to pray to our ancestors as well as cleanse my body and soul. After several of these spiritual rituals, I was able to conceive and have children. I prayed and prayed! The Spiritual doctor called my ancestors and asked for children, then I had one child then four more children I could not conceive after my fifth child. We asked the Spiritual doctors again. After several visit to my husband, I conceived and had three more children later."⁹² And Mao Yang left Christianity because she felt that Christianity was not useful. The Hmong Baptists had told her that if she called on God, if she spoke of everything that worried her, that He would answer. However, she explained that when she became sick, her prayers to God brought no response, nor did Christianity help her when she lost her children and her mother. Frustrated, she returned to practicing indigenous Hmong religion later in life and said that "nothing's gone bad" since. She believed that one's religion depended on what worked for that particular individual; she chose to convert back because, for her, the ancestors listened to her and offered a more effective and

⁹¹ Kia Vue, interview, digital recording at part 13.

⁹² See Lee, 86.12, Oral History Interviews of the Hmong Women's Action Team Oral History Project (Hmoob Thaj Yeeb Oral History Project) 1999-2000, Minnesota Historical Society, transcript, p. 13.

efficient response than Christianity did.⁹³ Nao Thao believed that since she became a shaman, her “family has become more healthy.” She admitted that her family could have become healthier for reasons beyond her work as a shaman—better medical care in the United States, for example—and that it is difficult to know, precisely, why things happen the way that they do.⁹⁴ However, how she understood the relationship between ritual practices and personal wellbeing, as well as the active interactions between the seen world and unseen world, was typical of the Hmong religious imagination.

For these reasons, religious conversion for Hmong people was not simply an experience of inner personal transformation, as is typical in many narratives of Christian conversion. Rather, Hmong people often saw religious change as an effort to find new ways to manage old spirits and solve real-world problems that affect their daily lives. Arising from a willingness to try different approaches to solving spiritual dilemmas, conversion for Hmong people was often additive in nature, characterized by bricolage and borrowing. For much of Hmong history, shamans were the individuals charged with the task of entering the spiritual world and making negotiations with spiritual entities, but the encounter with Christianity offered new options and possibilities. If praying to an all-powerful Christian God or speaking in tongues in a Pentecostal church appeared to help in making these negotiations and dealing with the spirit world, then these new religious practices were, in the minds of many Hmong people, worth adopting. Stories of Hmong religious change illustrate that many Hmong people considered religion to be, as Paj Ntaub Lis put it, “a resource.” “Which one can protect my family?” she said. “Who can best

⁹³ Mao Yang, interview, digital recording at 1:11:00-1:13:00, 1:15:00-1:19:00.

⁹⁴ Nao Thao, interview, digital recording at part 22.

serve me?” These were the questions that Hmong people asked as they weighed their religious options.⁹⁵

In the end, resettlement policies set up relationships between Hmong refugees and Christian churches and thus shaped Hmong religious choices in profound ways. Hmong refugees, however, approached and adopted Christianity according to a set of expectations and understandings of religion and conversion that were particular to their indigenous religious framework.⁹⁶ As William Siong argued, Hmong people became Christian as Hmong people. To illustrate this point, he recalled how a missionary visiting his church preached about the importance of accepting cultural heritage in cultivating faithful Christians. “No matter how long you put an alligator in the river,” the missionary had said, “it will not pretend to be a crocodile.” These words inspired William Siong, and they became a central feature of the message he shared with his Hmong congregation: “No matter how long we are in here, we are still Hmong; no matter how long we join, convert to Christianity, we are still Hmong.”⁹⁷ For a pastor of a Hmong Lutheran church and a man whose conversion to Christian had caused deep rifts within his own family, the words—“we are still Hmong”—expressed his conviction that becoming Christian did not require new converts to turn their backs on their Hmong identity. Even more, his words suggested that being Hmong fundamentally shaped how people became Christian. Christianity was but an addition to a preexisting Hmong core characterized by particular Hmong religious

⁹⁵ Neng Vang and Paj Ntaub Lis, interview, digital recording at 1:14:00-1:15:00.

⁹⁶ Hmong people have adopted Buddhism in a similarly additive manner. See Lee and Tapp, *Culture and Customs of the Hmong*, 38.

⁹⁷ William Siong, interview, digital recording at part 5.

frameworks that guided how Hmong people chose to “follow the new way.” They crossed the river, but they did not become crocodiles. They remained alligators.

Chapter Six:

Following the New Way, Part II -

Adapting Indigenous Hmong Religion to an American Religious Landscape

Suspended in midair and dangling on an invisible thread was a golden airplane.

Fashioned of gleaming foil paper, this three-dimensional model of a passenger jetliner hung at the center of the funeral home, ready to carry home the soul of a Hmong man who had passed away and whose spirit now embarked upon a journey from Minnesota to its place of origin, Laos. The Hmong traditionally believe that when a man dies, his soul must travel, retracing the course of his life, revisiting every village he had once called home, and returning to the piece of earth where his parents had buried the placenta that once nourished him in his mother's womb. From there, he continues on to his final home with the ancestors. In the past, before the war, a horse would have sufficed for this voyage; there had been no oceans for the traveling soul to cross, no continents to traverse, no airplanes needed for the trip. This man, however, had traveled many miles in his life, as had thousands of other Hmong Americans who had migrated from the mountains of Laos before settling in Minnesota. On this breezy August morning, several dozen family members gathered together to assist their relative in undertaking this arduous final passage, which began in a spacious Minneapolis building, formerly a neighborhood grocery store and now one of several Hmong-owned funeral homes in the Twin Cities.

In many ways, these funeral rituals reinforced the connections between the past and the present, linking the Hmong in Minnesota with their ancestors and the agrarian way of life they had known in the highlands of Asia. On one wall hung a large colorful banner with an image of a Hmong man sitting astride a horse, traveling alongside a cow and a rooster amid a verdant

mountain landscape. In the carpeted space in front of it, a ritual funeral singer chanted a *qhuab ke*, a “showing the way” song, while another man beat a drum and a third musician circled the room, playing the *qeej*, a mouth organ of bamboo reed pipes. Relatives prepared the meat of several cattle that had been offered as sacrifice. At the front of the funeral home lay the deceased man himself, a traditional Hmong crossbow tucked under his arm and a stick of sweet, musky incense burning at his elbow. Yet everywhere, there was evidence that honoring this man meant acknowledging not only his Hmong origins, but also his journey to America. Against the wall, in between ornamental flowers formed of gold-foil paper money, was a series of portraits, photographic evidence of an individual whose life straddled two worlds. In one portrait, he appeared dressed as a businessman and posed proudly before a field of corn. In another photograph, he wore traditional Hmong clothing and stood smiling against the backdrop of a car-lined street, in a neighborhood that could have been in any city in the United States.

The funeral rituals reflected the fact that this man had not only crossed cultures and continents, but had traveled great distances in an era when international mobility was highly regulated by governments. The careful arrangement of the body carried evidence of modern rules of migration: under one hand of the deceased man lay several documents, including a Social Security card and a passport. Family members understood the risks involved in attempting to cross international borders without proper paperwork, and though they were uncertain if a passport was necessary for spiritual travel, they took no chances for this final and most important journey. Should the travelling soul be turned back at the Thai or Lao border, the consequences would be dire: failing to fulfill the documentary requirements of international migration and thus barred from retracing his life’s journey and rejoining his ancestors, the man’s

spirit would be trapped in a state of limbo and may return to trouble the family members left behind.

A collection of papers slipped under his hand, a golden airplane suspended overhead: these small acts of care by loving family members preparing a man for his last spiritual voyage are manifest evidence of how resettling in the United States—both the experiences of forced migration and the policies directing it—had left an imprint on the ritual practices and religious imaginations of a Hmong community in diaspora.

American refugee resettlement policies imposed multiple obstacles to the practice of indigenous Hmong religion. However, as Hmong refugees became Hmong Americans and adapted to life in the United States, so, too, did they adapt their beliefs and practices to an American setting. They modified rituals and established institutions to facilitate their indigenous practices. They also apprehended that, in the United States, claims of “religion” offered certain legal, political, and cultural advantages, but that such claims have been evaluated according to Protestant Christian criteria. That their indigenous religion was not familiar, not institutionalized, and not belief- or text-based put Hmong Americans at a disadvantage. In the face of these challenges, Hmong Americans cleverly manufactured their indigenous religion as both religion and culture and have been quite savvy in capitalizing on this ambiguity. They have strategically claimed and disclaimed religion, deploying the flexible categories of religion and culture to preserve their traditions and to ensure accommodation of their beliefs and practices.

“The spirit world is changing, too”

In time, as Hmong refugees became Hmong Americans and adapted to life in the United States, they did, like Cziasarh Neng Yang, learn about the Constitution and the First Amendment. Moreover, as Hmong people changed, so, too, did their indigenous traditions—its beliefs, its practices, even the language used to describe it—in response to American laws and customs and the new pluralistic religious setting. In a variety of ways, Hmong Americans have modified their rituals to make them more suitable to the American environment. Instead of requiring that ceremony participants sacrifice animals at the ritual site, which is often a house, shamans after 1990 began to allow for animals to be killed at special Hmong butcher shops, on the condition that the bodies of the freshly slaughtered animals are brought quickly to the shaman for the ceremony to be conducted on the same day, before the animal spirits are able to stray too far. In addition, shamans, aware that the killing of dogs is illegal in the United States, began to use stuffed toy dogs in lieu of live animals, explaining that the spirits were just as satisfied with this substitution.¹

Rituals involving animal sacrifice have not only become easier, but also less common, particularly among second-generation Hmong Americans. “Younger people, they try to work on not butchering animals,” said Nao Thao. “...Burning the paper monies and the incense, that’s pretty much for now. You look at the elders, they still practice the old way of butchering animal to offer to the spirit or something, but the younger try to shift from there.” Nao Thao, herself a shaman, explained that “times have changed” and that the changes in ritual practices have been

¹ Sarah Fang and Nao Khue Yang, interview, digital recording at part 14-15.

guided not only by the preferences of the younger generation, but by the spirits themselves. “This is how we have been told—what I personally [have] been told—by the spirit,” she said. “That now, because we are in a modern country, and we are looking for the modern life, there’s no need to butcher or sacrifice another life to heal another life. That is not part of our healing...The spirit said that it’s...the modern life, so we have to adjust to fit into the modern life.”

In her view, the unseen spiritual realm and the visible realm mirror one another. “The spirit and the human, we are pretty much living in parallel,” she explained. “So [if] we change, the spirit world is changing, too.”² Paja Thao, whose work as a shaman in Chicago in the 1980s preceded Nao Thao’s work in Saint Paul by over a decade, offers a glimpse of how, even in the early years, Hmong spiritual beliefs and the ritual practices evolved in response to their new American environment. Describing the process of “calling and feeding ancestors,” he noted that the spirits of the Lao wilderness were not the only spirits that needed to be acknowledged, but that the spirits of American institutions demanded recognition, too:

And you call the wild jungle spirits of the village
And the river spirits
You call all the wild spirits to come and eat
Then it is finished

Now you come to live in America
When you have a feast
You must call the spirit government of Chicago
 And the spirits of the mountains and hills
 And the spirits of the borders
You must call all of them
Whether you have a small meal or a big feast
You must call them to come to eat
And drive away the evil sickness

² Nao Thao, interview, digital recording at part 12.

To protect my family³

In taking care to “call the spirit government of Chicago,” Paja Thao was doing what many Hmong shamans and ritual practitioners continue to do today: making indigenous Hmong religion American. At the forefront of these ritual changes is a new generation of shamans, of which a growing proportion are women and American-born Hmong who have little, if any, memory of life in Laos.

Over time, Hmong Americans have established institutions that allow them to practice their traditional beliefs and practices more easily. Today, several Hmong funeral homes in the Twin Cities offer ample space and generous hours to accommodate elaborate three-day funerals. Special Hmong butcher shops provide same-day, on-site slaughter of ritual pigs, chickens, and cows. (One of these special Hmong American livestock and meat markets in the Twin Cities is known as Long Cheng, named after the Laotian military base in Xiang Khouang province where many Hmong soldiers were based during the war.) The Hmong Cultural Center in Saint Paul now offers formal, organized courses in the proper practice of traditional rituals, knowledge of which was previously held only in the oral traditions of Hmong elders. “I would say it’s much easier [to practice traditional Hmong rituals in the United States] because they have cultural classes where people can learn how to play the *qeej*,” said Czaisarh Neng Yang. “They have cultural classes to teach our younger generation how to perform a soul-calling tradition or to be a *mej koob*. (A *mej koob* is the marriage negotiator.) You can learn how to become the *txiv xaiiv*, the one who prays or sings during the funeral for the family. So it becomes easier.”⁴

³ Thao and Conquergood, *I Am a Shaman*, 23.

⁴ Cziasarh Neng Yang, interview, digital recording at part 12. The creation of formal organizations to support the practice of indigenous Hmong religion has not been limited to the Twin Cities; practitioners of indigenous Hmong religion have created workshops to teach

Some Hmong Americans have even taken the step of establishing an animist church, shifting their practices to congregation-like sites, and creating official organizations complete with 501(c)3 status. Historically, the rituals of indigenous Hmong religion have occurred in households rather than in separate religious spaces, but Hmong Americans have begun to pursue different options. Like the efforts by Japanese immigrants who “Protestantized” Buddhism, Tzianeng Vang established *Poj Koob Yawm Ntxwv* with the goal of turning indigenous Hmong beliefs and practices “into something more close to religion.”⁵ Although his “newfound faith” is focused on “the spiritual deities in the home realm,” one of his central objectives has been to move “spirituality in the house *away* from the house into the temple.” His “new faith,” for this reason, is “an organized institution like a temple or church.” (He explained that he generally prefers the term “temple” because he considers it more appealing to people from an “Asian background,” though he uses the terms church and temple interchangeably.)

Tzianeng Vang was raised in a family that practiced indigenous Hmong religion until they became Southern Baptists shortly after their resettlement in the United States. He remained a devout Southern Baptist until 2009, when he traveled to Thailand and revisited the Mekong

particular skills elsewhere in the United States. See, for example, Vincent Her, “Searching for Sources of Hmong Identity in Multicultural America,” in *Hmong and American: From Refugees to Citizens*, ed. Vincent Her and Mary Louise Buley-Meissner (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2012), 36. Several scholars have found that Southeast Asian refugees have not simply preserved their religions, but have innovated and reinvented their beliefs, practice, and institutions to meet new needs. See, for example, Hien Duc Do and Mimi Khuc, “Immigrant Religious Adaptation: Vietnamese American Buddhists at Chua Viet Nam (Vietnamese Buddhist Temple),” in *Religion at the Corner of Bliss and Nirvana: Politics, Identity, and Faith in New Migrant Communities*, ed. Lois Ann Lorentzen et al. (Durham and London: Duke University, 2009), 124–138.

⁵ Isao Horinouchi, *Americanized Buddhism: A Sociological Analysis of a Protestantized Japanese Religion* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1973).

River, where many Hmong refugees had suffered and died as they crossed from Laos into Thailand. Walking and meditating on the sacred significance of the Mekong, he had a revelation:

[S]omehow all the mighty rivers in the world doesn't offer me the same mystique or the spirituality as the Mekong River because, the simple fact is that Mekong River represented life and death for me because I swam across the river, and I also had a lot of relatives that perished in that river. So the first time I set foot on it, I just couldn't help myself—I just [was] overcome with this emotion that I was just bawling. Tears dropped for thirty minutes. And I would not say that my Christianity, [my] faith did not rescue me there, then, but I kept thinking, I'm a Christian now, but if I was not a Christian, I wish there's a way that I could do a *hu plig*, you know? I would feel so good...So I just thought, it would be so cleansing and so spiritual for me if I could do something like that, but I couldn't.

At that moment, something “clicked” inside—“this is the spirituality that I need to follow,” he realized—and he decided that he needed to revisit his ancestors' ways.⁶

This revelation, along with the church-founding that followed, was long in the making. By his trip to Thailand in 2009, he had already become frustrated with his life as a Southern Baptist, which he felt had erased a part of himself. “The Bible and Christianity has very little or nothing about my own creation, you know?” he explained. “So that's become a constant battle with me.” Seemingly small things troubled him, such as the narrow language of prayer, which he saw as synecdoche for the greater sin of Christians repudiating their own Hmong culture. “You were never taught to use your Hmong words to substitute for ‘amen,’” he said sadly. At the same time, he yearned for something “tangible” that could connect him to his history and his ancestors. After his walk along the Mekong, he envisioned a “peaceful Hmong faith-based group,” an “institution we belong to, so I could have [and] still maintain that spirituality.”⁷

⁶ Tzianeng Vang, interview, digital recording at part 15.

⁷ Ibid., digital recording at part 13.

To solve this problem, he founded *Poj Koob Yawm Ntxwv*, which represents his efforts to standardize and unify indigenous practices and relocate them in a formal setting. “Traditionally, animists are...always in the structure of the home, so you don’t have an organized, unified standard facility where everybody could go—you know, like a temple, Buddhist temple, or a mosque or a church,” he explained. “So now with the new-found faith, we really take out all of the spirituality out of the home into that temple which has centralized locations, so that, in reality, it is like a temple or the church.”⁸ At the temple, they “cherish the *hu plig* and all the other traditional Hmong ceremonies that Hmong people do.”⁹ In organizing *Poj Koob Yawm Ntxwv*, he and his co-founders “actually organized it into like a religion,” one that merges Hmong traditions with beliefs and practices borrowed from Protestant Christian churches. In addition to hosting soul-calling and other traditional Hmong ceremonies, his new church “calls upon this Almighty, the source, or a deity,” a new practice which he described as “conducting the religious activities like a church.”¹⁰ He also draws on routines that he learned during his many years as a Southern Baptist, such as the custom of asking congregation members to donate rice for church gatherings.¹¹

While *Poj Koob Yawm Ntxwv* itself is a new innovation developed in the United States by an urban, professional Hmong American, Tzianeng Vang emphasized that he created it so that he could preserve his ties to his past. *Yawm ntxwv* means “ancestral spirits,” he explained, and the first step to joining the temple is to affirm bonds with the ancestors and invite them to live in the

⁸ Ibid., digital recording at part 14.

⁹ Ibid., digital recording at part 15.

¹⁰ Ibid., digital recording at part 14.

¹¹ Ibid., digital recording at part 15.

new spiritual home in the *Poj Koob Yawm Ntxwv* temple. “[S]o part of the initiation of this new faith is that I literally...call anybody that has deceased,” he said. “Call them up on to that alter, saying, ‘This is your new home now. Don’t come and seek for an earthly belonging at my home, living quarter, now. This is your new home, and this is our Hmong home for you as a Hmong person.’” He emphasized that members of *Poj Koob Yawm Ntxwv* do not simply honor or pay respect to the ancestors. Rather, the relationship is like how Southern Baptists might describe their relationship with Jesus: characterized by warm, familial love. “[In] the new faith that I found,” he said, “the philosophy goes: nobody else loves you more than the one that gave birth to you.” He paused before adding, “And then it goes further in saying, you love nobody more than the one you gave birth to.”¹²

Hmong Americans have endeavored to make a welcoming space for themselves in non-religious settings, too. Hospitals, for example, have begun to accept the presence of Hmong shamans alongside doctors trained in Western medicine. In 2009, Mercy Medical Center in Merced, California, became the first program in the nation to license a cadre of Hmong shamans, approved to conduct nine traditional healing ceremonies inside the hospital, including the soul-calling ceremony, *hu plig*. Falling somewhere between a chaplain and a doctor, these shamans have unrestricted access to patients, as do clergy members, and yet their work is understood to have distinctive healing purposes. Staff members at Mercy Medical Center recounted incidents during which Hmong shamans performed ceremonies that produced visible and miraculous improvement in Hmong patients’ health. These events made a “big impression,” Jim McDiarmid, a psychologist and residency program director, told the *New York Times*. The formal inclusion of these shamans illustrates the great distance that indigenous Hmong religion has traveled to

¹² Ibid., digital recording at part 15-16.

becoming an accepted fixture on the American religious landscape, even if it remains uncertain if these traditions do indeed constitute a religion.¹³

“Religious, cultural, or some mix of both”

As spiritual healers who blur the boundary between clergy and doctor, the curious status of shamans at Mercy Medical Center is the latest chapter in debates that have accompanied the Hmong throughout their lives in Laos, Thailand, and the United States. What is Hmong religion? Do indigenous Hmong traditions constitute a religion? In truth, these questions may not necessarily be useful for understanding Hmong beliefs and practices; that Christianity has fundamentally shaped how Americans have conceptualized and defined “religion” calls into question the utility of applying this label to an ethnic community that historically has not organized its life according to this social category. A juxtaposition of two legal cases—*Yang v. Sturner* and *State v. Tenerelli*—illuminates the fundamental challenge of defining religion in an American setting characterized by both a Protestant majority and unprecedented religious pluralism.

Just as important, these two cases shed light on the opportunities that can arise when people do not fit easily into one category or another. For the Hmong, claiming religion had advantages, but so, too, did disclaiming religion. As these cases illustrate, Hmong Americans have shrewdly used the ambiguous definition of Hmong religion and the fluid categories of multiculturalism and pluralism to their advantage, describing Hmong rituals and beliefs as

¹³ Patricia Leigh Brown, “A Doctor for Disease, A Shaman For The Soul,” *New York Times*, September 19, 2009.

“religion” and other times as “culture,” to ensure their accommodation and protected status. Analysis of how particular communities like the Hmong have deployed claims of religion underscores the cultural and historical specificity of the meaning of religion, the possibilities and limitations of religion as a category, and the capacity of liberal societies to fulfill their commitment to religious tolerance and freedom.

Yang v. Sturner is one instance in which Hmong Americans persuasively argued that their traditional beliefs are religious beliefs that merit the protection of the First Amendment. One night in 1987, a 23-year-old Rhode Island Hmong man named Neng Yang was sleeping when he suffered a seizure that caused him to lose consciousness. Neng Yang was rushed by ambulance to Rhode Island Hospital, where he passed away three days later, on December 24. The hospital staff, unable to explain why Neng Yang had died, contacted the office of the state medical examiner. On December 25, without informing or securing the permission of the Yang family, William Sturner, the Chief Medical Examiner, conducted an autopsy on Neng Yang’s body.

You Vang Yang and Ia Kue Yang, Neng Yang’s parents, were horrified to learn of the autopsy and argued that the state’s autopsy statutes “violate their first amendment right to exercise their religion freely.” According to the court documents, the Yang family “adhere to the religious beliefs of the Hmong, one of which prohibits any mutilation of the body, including autopsies or the removal of organs during an autopsy.” Such an autopsy disrupted the spirit’s journey after death, causing consequences not only for Neng Yang’s spirit, but for the rest of the living Yang family. As the Yang family explained to the court, “the spirit of Neng [their son] would not be free, therefore his spirit will come back and take another person in his family.”

Throughout the case, Judge Raymond Pettine was moved by the intense, sincere display of religious belief. “I have seldom, in twenty-four years on the bench, seen such a sincere

instance of emotion displayed,” he said. “I could not help but also notice the reaction of the large number of Hmongs who had gathered to witness the hearing. Their silent tears shed in the still courtroom as they heard the Yangs’ testimony provided stark support for the depth of the Yangs’ grief.” The “tearful outburst in the courtroom during the hearing” caused the judge to believe that the Yangs’ beliefs were “deeply-held.”

The beliefs that brought the Yang family to court were accepted not only to be sincere, but also to be religious. The defendant, William Sturner, did not call into question “the sincerity of the Yangs’ religious beliefs” or “claim that the Hmongs’ prohibition of autopsies is not a basic tenet of their religion.” In his defense, he argued that, having encountered several unexplained deaths in the Southeast Asian refugee population in Rhode Island, he believed that an autopsy was necessary to determine if “an infectious agent capable of spreading an epidemic within the state” had been the cause of Neng Yang’s death. However, not once did he challenge that the Yang family’s beliefs arose from their religion.

Ultimately, the court ruled that Sturner violated the Yang family’s religious beliefs as protected by the First Amendment, on the grounds that there was no evidence that such unexplained deaths posed harm to the broader population of Rhode Island. According to the decision, there was no “‘compelling state interest’ in performing autopsies to overcome the Yangs’ religious beliefs”; moreover, the judge decided that “it is reasonable to believe that when a medical examiner receives the body of a person who might be a Hmong, he should realize that an autopsy would violate the religious beliefs of the decedent’s next of kin.” The court later withdrew the decision, upon considering the outcome of *Employment Division v. Smith*, which was decided a few months after *Yang v. Sturner*. Nonetheless, the idea that Hmong beliefs about

spirits were valid religious beliefs was never questioned.¹⁴ Just like Czisarah Neng Yang, You Vang Yang and Ia Kue Yang began to “know the Constitution” and argued successfully that their Hmong traditions amount to a religion and that they have a formal right to believe and practice it.

Although there was no dispute about the religiousness of Hmong beliefs about spirits in *Yang v. Sturner*, Hmong Americans have also successfully argued that Hmong beliefs and practices are *not* religion. Such was the case in 1999 in *State v. Tenerelli*, in which the Minnesota State Supreme Court ruled that the stabber of a Hmong man could be required, as restitution, to cover the costs of a *hu plig*, a Hmong soul-calling ceremony in which shamans sacrifice live animals in order to heal both body and soul. In contrast to *Yang v. Sturner*, in which Hmong Americans claimed that their traditions amounted to a religion in order to gain restitution for an autopsy that conflicted with their beliefs, in *State v. Tenerelli*, Hmong Americans disclaimed religion to secure accommodation for their traditional rituals.

On July 15, 1996, Txawj Xiong was driving home from a picnic in Saint Paul with his son, Meng, and his wife, Joua Vang, when he encountered two men, Anthony Tenerelli and Jeremy Wade Benton. Tenerelli and Benton, who had been arguing before Xiong arrived at the intersection, approached Xiong’s car, and Xiong, fearing for his safety, opened the trunk of his car, which contained a Hmong carving knife. Details of what happened next remain unclear, but a violent confrontation ensued, during which Xiong was hit, kicked, and stabbed in the back twice with the Hmong carving knife. A jury convicted Tenerelli of second- and fifth-degree assault. The Ramsey County District Court required that Tenerelli serve time in prison and, as

¹⁴ *You Vang Yang v. Sturner*, 728 F. Supp. 845 (United States District Court, D. Rhode Island, 1990); 750 F. Supp. 558 (United States District Court, D. Rhode Island, 1990).

restitution, assume responsibility for the expenses associated with a *hu plig* ceremony for Txawj Xiong.

Tenerelli appealed, arguing that the *hu plig* is a religious ceremony and that the requirement that he cover its costs violated the Establishment Clause. By 1999, the case had made its way to the Minnesota State Supreme Court, where the discussion focused on the nature of the *hu plig*—its practices and significance, both for the Hmong community and for Txawj Xiong in particular. The burden lay on Tenerelli to prove that the Txawj Xiong’s *hu plig* was a religious ceremony and that the Establishment Clause was thus implicated.

To answer the question of whether or not the *hu plig* was a religious ceremony, the court relied on the expertise of two Hmong Americans familiar with the *hu plig* and its cultural context. In preparing the victim impact report, a probation official with the department of corrections contacted William Yang of the Hmong American Partnership, a Hmong community organization based in Saint Paul. In this report, which was filed with the trial court, William Yang described the *hu plig* as a ceremony “to restore the soul of a victim, normally a person who has been physically or emotionally traumatized.” He added that there was a “deeply-held belief, particularly among elders of the Hmong community, that without the restoration ceremony the person will become sick and eventually die.”

To support his case, Tenerelli turned to another cultural expert, a Hmong American man named Neng Xiong, who had been born in Laos and had lived in the United States for thirteen years. Trained in sociology, cultural anthropology, and law, Neng Xiong was educated American schools and also the son of a shaman and “a traditional Hmong family.” Neng concurred with William Yang’s description of the *hu plig* and added that “90% of the Hmong people living in the United States over the age of 40 who have not converted to Christianity still

believe in the traditional Hmong practices and ceremonies.” However, when questioned if the *hu plig* is “partially a religious ceremony” during the trial court, Neng Xiong declined to characterize it as such. “It is difficult to say because in the tradition itself, my understanding is that, from my cultural anthropology studies, that a religion has to be a form of belief that is institutionalized,” he said. “But at the same time the Hmong also, this is a kind of a form of belief from thousands of years ago and the thing has never been institutionalized yet.” In other words, Neng Xiong did not say definitively that the *hu plig* was or was not a religious ceremony, only that Hmong traditions, not having yet become “institutionalized,” meaning that the status of this Hmong ceremony was uncertain. Neng Xiong thus did not provide Tenerelli the conclusive statement that he needed.

Pushed into a corner, Tenerelli made one further effort to bolster his case that the *hu plig* is a religious ceremony: he argued that shamans are religious authorities. In the victim impact statement submitted to the court, Txawj Xiong had said that a shaman would conduct the *hu plig*. The use of a shaman, argued Tenerelli, was further evidence that the *hu plig* is a religious ceremony because shamans do fundamentally religious work.

Aside from the question of whether or not the *hu plig* is a religious ritual, another related debate emerged during the case: was the *hu plig* that Txawj Xiong proposed commensurate with his suffering? The expenses of the *hu plig* planned by Txawj Xiong were submitted to the trial court and itemized as follows:

- \$15.00 – Replacement T-Shirt
- \$894.46 – Automobile repair
- \$380.00 – Suit for Hu Plig ceremony
- \$20.00 – Shirt for Hu Plig ceremony
- \$540.00 – Cow for sacrifice for Hu Plig ceremony
- \$90.00 – Pig for sacrifice for Hu Plig ceremony
- \$10.00 – Two chickens for sacrifice for Hu Plig ceremony
- \$155.15 – Roast Pig for Hu Plig ceremony

\$200.00 – Shoua woman to conduct Hu Plig ceremony

During his testimony, Neng Xiong contested the scale of the proposed *hu plig*. According to Neng Xiong, the number of animals sacrificed for a *hu plig* depends on the severity of the injury. Having consulted with three Hmong elders, Neng Xiong testified that sacrificing four animals was suitable for a “major” injury, but that Txawj Xiong’s injuries were only “medium.” For this reason, he suggested that the disallowed restitution for the cost of the two chickens, on the grounds that the cow and pig would be enough to satisfy the spiritual requirements and that the two chickens would be “excessive.”

In the end, the Minnesota Supreme Court upheld the lower courts’ decision to require that Tenerelli cover the costs of the *hu plig* as restitution. Writing for the majority, Chief Justice Blatz wrote that Neng Xiong’s testimony failed to provide enough evidence that the Txawj Xiong’s *hu plig* was indeed a religious ceremony. Furthermore, the court found that the shaman, as a religious authority, was not exclusively so. “While a shaman can be thought of as a religious leader, the record indicates that shamans also serve other functions in the Hmong community,” Blatz wrote, pointing out that “even some of the Hmong people who have converted to Christianity continue to engage in these traditional ceremonies.” Finally, the court agreed with the lower courts’ decision to adjust the expenses of the *hu plig* downward and disallow the restitution of the two chickens, as well as the suit and shirt.

Two justices chose to write separate opinions, which reveal the great complexity of the task of determining whether or not the *hu plig* is a religious ceremony. Justice Paul Anderson agreed with the majority and chose to write a special concurrence. “We simply do not have in the record the information necessary to prudently conclude that Txawj Xiong’s Hu Plig was or was not a religious practice,” Anderson wrote. “What is or what is not a religious practice is a

difficult question to answer and the search for an answer has in many cases led to contradictory and arbitrary results when court-prescribed tests for religious practices have been applied. Such tests are indeterminate in nature and subject to variations in the general level of scrutiny employed.” Referring to *United States v. Ballard*, in which it was stated the court must determine if “beliefs are sincerely held and whether objectively the claimed belief occupies the same place in the life of the objector as an orthodox belief in God holds in the life of one clearly qualified for exemption,” Anderson argued:

The key to our analysis of whether Txawj Xiong's Hu Plig is or is not a religious ceremony turns on the fact that it appears there are different levels at which the Hu Plig ceremony is conducted. The record indicates that, depending upon the belief of the beneficiary, the Hu Plig in some circumstances may be a cultural and social ceremony and, in others, may be a religious practice. Thus, at least in part, the question of whether the Hu Plig is religious appears to depend on the nature of the beliefs of the individual for whom the ceremony is conducted. The victim impact statement indicates that Txawj Xiong ‘went through a Hmong traditional healing ceremony,’ but there is no evidence on the record of Txawj Xiong's beliefs and no clarifying information on his beliefs or his purpose in having the Hu Plig. Neng Xiong conceded that it was difficult for him to say whether the Hu Plig was a religious practice, but according to his anthropological studies, he understood that a belief must be institutionalized to be religious and that the Hu Plig is not institutionalized. While there is much on this record that leads me to believe that under certain circumstances a Hu Plig may be in whole or in part religious, it is unclear whether Txawj Xiong's beliefs concerning his Hu Plig are religious, cultural, or some mix of both.

In Anderson’s view, Tenerelli failed to prove that Txawj Xiong *himself* understood and pursued his *hu plig* as a religious ceremony. “Tenerelli’s argument may contain some merit for, in certain circumstances and to certain individuals, the Hu Plig may be a religious ceremony,” he wrote. “Nevertheless, Tenerelli has failed to demonstrate that Txawj Xiong’s Hu Plig was conducted at a ‘level’ such that it must be viewed as a religious practice rather than at a level that does not meet the constitutional standard for a religious practice.” Finally, Anderson wrote that, had the *hu plig* been deemed a religious ceremony, the court’s determination that the sacrifice of

the two chickens was excessive and would have neared an “excessive entanglement with religion.”

Justice Gilbert offered the lone dissent, stating that the ordering of restitution for the *hu plig* ceremony “delved into significant religious and spiritual traditions,” resulting in “excessive entanglement.” The problem, Gilbert wrote, is that the lower courts had relied too heavily on the testimony of Neng Xiong, whose unwillingness to categorize the *hu plig* as a religious ceremony stemmed from the fact that Hmong traditions are not “institutionalized.” Pointing to the objective test established by *United States v. Seeger*, Gilbert argued that there are other means of determining if a ceremony is religious:

In *Seeger*, the United States Supreme Court recognized ‘the richness and variety of spiritual life in our country’ and the diverse forms of expression these religions encompass. The Court stated that a belief is religious if it is a ‘sincere and meaningful [belief that] occupies a place in the life of its possessor parallel to that filled by the orthodox belief in God. Thus, to determine whether a belief is religious, a court must decide whether it is sincerely held and whether it is, objectively, religious.

There is no dispute in this case regarding the sincerity of the victim’s deeply held belief. There is, however, a dispute as to whether the Hu Plig healing or soul restoration ceremony is religious. This court now must determine the resolution of that dispute. The answer to the religious question is dependent on whether the ceremony ‘occupied a place in [the victim’s] life parallel to that filled by the orthodox belief in God.’ In concluding that the Hu Plig ceremony is not religious, the trial court ignored the *Seeger* test, instead relying exclusively on an expert witness’ statement that the ceremony had not been ‘institutionalized.’

Had the trial court used the appropriate test in determining whether the Hu Plig ceremony was religious, several undisputed facts would have led it to the conclusion that the ceremony was religious. According to the victim impact statement, which is not contradicted in the record, the Hu Plig ceremony is based on the belief that the ‘victim’s soul is replaced by that of animals,’ and that without the restoration of the soul through the Hu Plig ceremony, the victim will become sick and eventually die. Although specific practices differ among religions, many religions focus on the existence and restoration of the soul. Furthermore, the Hu Plig ceremony is performed by a shaman (‘holy man’) or shao woman (‘holy woman’). It is undisputed in the record that these holy people are ‘religious leaders in the Hmong community.’ Thus, they are objectively as

vital to the Hu Plig ceremony as other religious officials are in other religions. Thus, the appellant has met his burden of proof that the Hu Plig ceremony is, from an objective perspective, religious, regardless of the institutionalization of that ceremony.

The trial court became excessively entangled in religious beliefs by picking and choosing what portions of the Hu Plig ceremony were compensable. The trial court ordered that appellant pay restitution for the costs of two of the sacrificed animals, a cow and a pig. However, the trial court then determined that the victim was not entitled to restitution for the sacrifice of two chickens because, based on the extent of the victim's injuries, that sacrifice was 'excessive.' It is inappropriate for the trial court to evaluate the necessity of certain aspects of the victim's religious practices and disallow reimbursement for those practices that the trial court does not deem 'appropriate.'¹⁵

State v. Tenerelli shows, first, that it remains difficult to argue in courts that Hmong rituals are religious. Hmong traditions were, and continue to be, unfamiliar to Americans and incongruent with Protestant definitions of religion. In addition, judges have generally valued claims that centered on belief and personal conscience rather than on ritual and practice.¹⁶ Given these obstacles, Anthony Tenerelli faced an uphill battle in proving that a *hu plig* was, in fact, religious.

Moreover, this case demonstrates that disclaiming religion might have its own advantages. In thinking about how religious minorities endeavor to preserve their traditions in

¹⁵ *State of Minnesota v. Tenerelli*, 598 N.W.2d 668 (S.Ct. Minn. 1999).

¹⁶ Bender and Snow, "From Alleged Buddhists to Unreasonable Hindus: First Amendment Jurisprudence after 1965"; Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*. Indigenous Hmong religion also faces the challenge of overcoming the intellectual obstacle of being considered "idolatry" and thus a "false religion," a category that, since early modern Europe, has continued to shape judicial rulings on which groups are pursuing legitimately true religion. As Jakob de Roover argued, "even where the state did not engage in explicit endorsement of any religious truth, the conceptual mechanism that allowed it to sift the religious (as the realm of toleration and freedom) from the secular (as the realm of state interference) always involved *an implicit notion of false religion*." See Jakob de Roover, "Secular Law and the Realm of False Religion," in *After Secular Law*, ed. Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Robert Yelle, and Mateo Taussig-Rubbo (Stanford: Stanford Law Books, 2011), 52.

the United States, one might assume that it would involve claiming religion and using the First Amendment for protection. That groups might find it advantageous to deny the label of religion challenges assumptions about how religious minorities might strive for accommodation. Further, the uninstitutionalized character of indigenous Hmong religion offered a surprising—and ultimately useful—flexibility.

Yang v. Sturner and *State v. Tenerelli* reveal long-running debates about how to make sense of Hmong religion in a society and legal system historically shaped by Christian definitional criteria of “religion.” As evident at other moments in Hmong migration to the United States, the application of categories such as “religion” and “holy man” to describe indigenous Hmong religion are new, frustrating, and perhaps not always helpful in understanding Hmong traditions. As both *Yang v. Sturner* and *State v. Tenerelli* indicate, however, Hmong Americans have discovered opportunities in this ambiguity.¹⁷

¹⁷ That Hmong Americans have used the courts to advance their objectives of securing accommodation for their indigenous beliefs and practices resembles other interactions between indigenous religious traditions and law. As Greg Johnson argued in his study of religion and law in contemporary Hawai’i, “indigenous people continue to exercise considerable agency, even in the most Western of legal domains,” and “contemporary indigenous activities in the legal sphere are forms of robust cultural expression.” Furthermore, even if indigenous people fail in their efforts to use law to advance particular cultural claims, “such claims may take on cultural and religious vitality outside the confines of law” and shaped indigenous religious life more broadly. In this way, “secular law sets up conditions for cultural and religious possibilities that it cannot begin to anticipate or contain... Even the most staid of secular institutions are capable of starting all kinds of fires.” See Greg Johnson, “Courting Culture: Unexpected Relationships between Religion and Law in Contemporary Hawai’i,” in *After Secular Law*, ed. Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Robert Yelle, and Mateo Taussig-Rubbo (Stanford: Stanford Law Books, 2011), 284, 283, 297. For other discussions of indigenous religion and its encounter with Christianity and with American law, see Wenger, *We Have a Religion*; Michael McNally, *Ojibwe Singers: Hymns, Grief, and a Native Culture in Motion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Arriving in the United States without identification with a church or a world religion meant that it was more difficult for Christian resettlement sponsors to accommodate their indigenous traditions. However, when they were in a position to advocate for themselves, Hmong Americans found a way to dwell in the space between “religion” and “culture,” and the uncertainty of their position provided useful freedom to claim one category or another. Hmong religion, as always, was on the move.

Conclusion

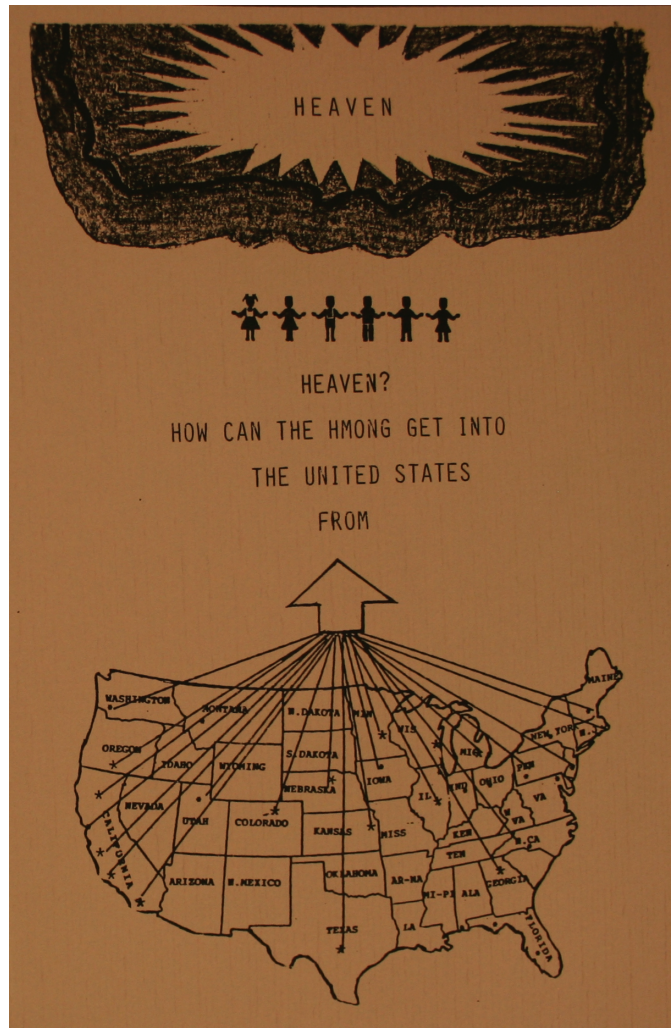


Figure Six: “From the United States How Can the Hmong Get Into Heaven?”
Source: Refugee Studies Center Records, Immigration History Research Center,
University of Minnesota

In the order of service for their annual thanksgiving celebration, members of the Hmong Christian Church of God in Minneapolis offered a spiritual sequel to their odyssey on the “I Am the Way” airplane and a fuller narrative of their past and future spiritual migrations, as they understood it. Fearing for their lives, they had left Laos for Thailand, and in Thailand, they had learned about the United States. After coming to America, they learned that Heaven is a better

place yet. “From the United States, how can the Hmong get into heaven?” the picture asked. In the church’s view, Christianity, *kev cai tshiab*, was the new way to freedom and security in the celestial Promised Land, the homeland that they, as refugees, had longed for and never truly had. “Hmong are strangers and exiles to the many countries of the earth, because Hmong have no a lasting country [sic],” read the order of service, “but Hmong are seeking the country to come that is heaven.”¹

As I have argued, refugee resettlement set in motion profound transformations in the religious lives of Hmong Americans. On one hand, the public-private, church-state organization of refugee resettlement meant that, for many Hmong refugees, migration through Christianity precipitated migration to Christianity. These religious changes had begun, to a limited degree, in Laos and Thailand, where pre-migration encounters between Hmong people and foreign missionaries had introduced Christianity to a segment of the Lao Hmong population. Missionaries won a few converts and, more importantly, planted the idea that Christianity could function as a spiritual alternative to the indigenous rituals that Hmong people traditionally practiced to maintain amicable relations with the spirit world. As Hmong people resettled in the United States, Christianity carried special appeal. American refugee resettlement policies, in a variety of ways, disrupted the practice of indigenous Hmong religion. Continuing to face spiritual and physical problems, but deprived of the human and material resources to solve them through traditional means, Hmong refugees turned to Christianity to fill the ritual and spiritual void. Particularly for the earliest arrivals, it was an obvious and rational solution. Christian congregations had sponsored Hmong refugees, offered generous assistance to them, and developed close relationships with them. Hmong refugees, in turn, were grateful for and

¹ Folder 62, Box 2, The Refugee Studies Center, University of Minnesota Records, General/Multiethnic Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

impressed by their help. Thus, resettlement policies, by imposing unintentional constraints on indigenous Hmong religion and facilitating religious contact between Hmong people and Christian churches, shaped the religious options available to Hmong refugees and, in turn, directed the development of Hmong American religious life. For these geographic and spiritual migrations, the Hmong Christian Church of God expressed their gratitude, declaring, “Thanks God, and the United States Government.”²

What would have happened had the United States government approached Hmong refugee resettlement differently? Historians rarely assess the past through counterfactuals, but the experience of Hmong refugees resettled in Australia suggest a different set of resettlement policy possibilities and also offer a powerful testimonial to the influence of resettlement policies on the religious lives of refugees. Gary Yia Lee has argued that, in contrast to the resettlement program of the United States, Australian refugee resettlement policies have been conducive to the maintenance of indigenous Hmong religion. Australian resettlement differed in two significant ways. First, religious institutions provided fewer resettlement services. “[T]he Australian Government's refugee program does not depend entirely on church and community sponsorship,” he observed. “Most of the Hmong were admitted under this official program which provides all necessary support services with minor assistance from voluntary agencies. They do not, therefore, come into early contacts with people who may influence them to doubt their traditional religion and to embrace a new one.” The Australian government, by performing much of the resettlement work without church involvement, created a situation in which Hmong refugees had greatest direct contact with the government, rather than the church.

² Ibid.

Hmong refugees in the United States found Christianity appealing in part because assimilation-oriented American resettlement policies undermined their indigenous religion. In this way, too, Australia took a different path. “[T]he Australian Government actively supports the idea of a multicultural nation, as mentioned previously, and has made funds available to various groups to test out the concept, especially in the fields of culture, arts and education,” Lee noted. “The Hmong happen to be in Australia at a time when this experiment is only at its beginning stage. By joining in, they are thus encouraged to carry on with their changing traditions while learning to adapt to the host community.” In taking positive action to help Hmong refugees retain their indigenous beliefs and practices—here, identified as “culture”—the Australian government created circumstances in which Hmong refugees felt free to continue their traditions. These two policies, in combination with a small refugee population with a democratic and responsive ethnic leadership, meant that, “[u]nlike some of those in the United States of America, the Hmong in Australia have never questioned the relevance of traditional beliefs to their new life, even when only rituals involving no killing of live animals are observed.”³

That Lee noted in passing that “only rituals involving no killing of live animals are observed” in Australia offers a hint that Hmong people in Australia did experience religious changes, even if these changes did not involve the adoption of Christianity. Indeed, a proper telling of the spiritual migrations of Hmong refugees does not draw the boundaries at the Hmong encounter with Christianity, but also includes the wide array of transformations that refugee

³ Gary Yia Lee, “Culture and Adaptation: Hmong Refugees in Australia 1976-83,” in *The Hmong in Transition*, ed. Glenn Hendricks, Bruce Downing, and Amos Deinard (New York: Center for Migration Studies and the Southeast Asian Refugee Studies Project of the University of Minnesota, 1986), 65.

resettlement produced in the beliefs, practices, and identifications of indigenous Hmong religion. In Laos, where geographic boundaries were often coterminous with ethnic, cultural, and religious boundaries, the great majority of Hmong people adhered to a set of beliefs and rituals that were so fused into their self-identities and practices of daily life that it was never conceptualized as a bounded, separate sphere designated as religion. Hmong people had no official name for their religion, nor did they even think of themselves as having a religion. Similarly, foreign Christian missionaries and Buddhist ethnic groups in Laos both dismissed the idea that Hmong people had any religion at all.

In the process of their refugee migration, however, Hmong people not only encountered religion as a concept, but also discovered that this category matters. Lao, Cambodian, and Vietnamese refugees who were resettled in the United States during the same period belonged to a familiar religion, Buddhism, and church sponsors and voluntary agencies assisted Buddhist refugees in the search for monks and temples so that they could continue to practice their own religions. Indeed, these pluralistic resettlement workers considered the maintenance of refugees' religious and cultural traditions as a critical piece of effective resettlement.

In contrast, Hmong people did not arrive in the United States with a recognizable religion. Unlike the Southeast Asian refugees who had a religion that was familiar and official and thus respected and accommodated, Hmong refugees were not able to cite a holy text, affiliate with a congregation, or identify their religion by a common name and thus found themselves in a significantly more difficult situation. Even more, resettlement policies, through its preference categories and dispersal plan, unintentionally but powerfully undermined the practice of indigenous Hmong religion. Deprived of the clan members, ritual experts, sacrificial animals, and open space necessary for the proper practice of Hmong rituals, Hmong refugees found

themselves spiritually lost—though not for long. As Hmong people acclimated to their new American environment, they adapted their indigenous beliefs and practices. Even more, they began to describe and organize their indigenous traditions as religion in order to secure recognition, protection, and accommodation. Religion did not always afford advantages, though, and in this regard, Hmong Americans have cleverly used the flexible categories of religion and culture, in addition to the fluid boundaries of their traditions, to keep their indigenous beliefs and practices alive, albeit in new, reinvented form.

Hmong people have a reputation for never staying still. Even in death, their souls must travel. At times, the migration has been welcome—a journey to heaven, perhaps, or an odyssey on a golden airplane to reunite with the ancestors. Other times, their movement has been forced and tragic, with war, poverty, and spiritual troubles precipitating their uprooting and flight. Wherever they have gone, so, too, have their religious traditions gone, bearing the mark of these journeys and the interactions with people, spirits, and even governments that they encountered along the way.

A Hmong legend tells the story of Siv Yis, the Hmong hero and the father of all Hmong shamans, and his encounter with the evil spirit brothers. Nine evil spirit brothers ambushed Siv Yis while he was walking home one evening and challenged him to a fight, which the clever and courageous Siv Yis accepted. The oldest of the evil spirit brothers, believing that he could easily conquer the clever shaman, transformed into a raging wild water buffalo bedecked with ferocious horns and fangs. Siv Yis, however, transformed into a brutish beast as well, and the two struggled fiercely for some time, until the other eight evil spirits became water buffalo, intending to aid their older brother. Realizing that he could not defeat all nine alone, Siv Yis changed into a human being and sliced the

spirits to pieces with his magic saber. But when he saw that the nine evil spirit brothers could easily pull themselves together again, Siv Yis turned into an airy wisp of cloud that drifted high into the refuge of the sky. The evil brothers, determined to catch Siv Yis, transformed into a mighty gust of wind that blew the cloud around, sending Siv Yis tumbling topsy-turvy toward the burning sun. So Siv Yis changed into a drop of water, hoping to plunge to the earth and disappear amongst the dew. And when one of the evil brothers turned into treetop leaf to catch Siv Yis on the swoop, Siv Yis became a long-legged deer that trampled on the leaf and galloped swiftly away to the safety of the forest, leaving the evil spirit brothers behind, defeated in the dust.⁴

Like the famous shaman Siv Yis, Hmong refugees have survived several decades of war through flight and self-transformation. Resilient and responsive to changing circumstances, they have found that religious change—especially the adoption of Christianity and the transformation of indigenous Hmong religion—has achieved multiple practical goals, including the security of home and health and the vitality of families and communities. Yet these religious changes arose not only from Hmong people’s will for survival; they have been due in equal measure to external circumstances to which Hmong people have creatively responded. Like Siv Yis, who transformed into a cloud wisp and a raindrop in response to the transformations of the evil spirit brothers, Hmong refugees have survived through self-reinvention and through dynamic interaction with the changing world around them. For many Hmong people, “to follow the new

⁴ Se Yang, “Shee Yee and the Evil Spirits That Ate People and Drank Blood,” in *Myths, Legends and Folk Tales from the Hmong of Laos*, ed. Charles Johnson (Saint Paul: Macalester College, 1985), 39–42.

rule or way” has meant to become Christian, and yet that has not been the only way that Hmong people have changed in order to stay alive. There are, indeed, many ways.

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