

HMong Spiritism

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Abstract: At the heart of any Spiritism is suffering—a suffering without hope. Articles written about the HMong religious practices rarely touch on this aspect of life. This article exposes the central difficult issues, presents the historical problems of remedies, and finally offers a true theology of the cross approach to deal with this devastating disguise of the devil, namely HMong Spiritism.

A Description of the Problem

HMong Spiritism is as complex today as it was in history when the first Christian missionaries reached the HMong people in Asia. It varies as widely as the clans that exist in the HMong society. It is analogous to the varieties of Christian denominations. One clan, even a subgroup within a clan, will define its own Spiritism differently from another. However, there are some basic fundamental similarities of the belief system that thread all HMong Spiritism and universal Spiritism together.

Before further discussions on HMong Spiritism, it is important first to establish the primary reason for such writing as this. People who are influenced by Spiritism are afflicted, oppressed, and in constant fear. The bottom line is that they are suffering. As one woman has said, “Spiritism is like food with poison to someone who loves life.”¹

HMong Spiritism fits into the belief system of *henotheism*, including a strong element of ancestral worship. This belief system deems it important to adhere to a certain spirit or god, while recognizing the existence of others.² In the case of HMong Spiritism, it expresses itself in this way, *ib tug dlaab ib tug qhua*, “one spirit, one guest.” This strict adherence has numerous ramifications in the socio-religious-political facets of HMong society, both positively and negatively. It bonds the group together tightly in all aspects of life. At the same time, it challenges the trust and support that are essential in communal societies.

From the scriptural point of view, Spiritism is none other than one form or

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another of diabolical possession. One may speak of a universal diabolical possession that began already in the Garden of Eden; the religious diabolical possession that one sees in such a people group as the HMong; or a personal diabolical possession that afflicts an individual in a way that is recognizable by both the one that is afflicted and the loved ones that surround him or her.

What makes HMong Spiritism so complex has to do largely with the history of the HMong people as they migrated from one region to another and came under various religious influences in the Far East. Much of the influence took place over many centuries of living in China and the struggles for survival there. Therefore, there is a strong element of ancestral worship as well as a strong element of the ancient Chinese religious practices that include various Chinese gods and goddesses. There is a strong hint of pantheism as well. It embraces the strong notion of reincarnation with all the related philosophical challenges and questions that go unanswered.

One thing is clear, however. No one group within the HMong people will agree upon a set system of beliefs for HMong Spiritism. For examples, there is no agreement as to how many souls a person has, anywhere from three souls to multiple souls. There is no agreement as to how many spirits one worships with the intent of appeasement. Even within the same clan with a close adherence to the same spirit, there will be differences. For example, certain families of the same clan may claim five spirits or thirteen which they must appease. “The inconsistency or even contradiction between two sets of beliefs does not give the HMong any concern. They are interested in gaining practical benefits from the spirits, not in orthodoxy of belief.”³ The goal is magical efficacy, which is dealing almost exclusively with power encounter. If a certain ritual or shaman does not bring about the desired remedies, the HMongs are not shaken by it. They just repeat or seek another ritual or another shaman until a perceived success is achieved or the desired benefit is no longer needed.

Today in the U.S., HMong Spiritism will express itself in a variety of animistic practices and categories. The traditional religious practice of Animism remains the main practice. Various surveys over three decades of different concentrations of HMong communities throughout the U.S. consistently reveal that around 80–85% still practice the traditional religion. Other relatively recent movements that have taken root, as described by the Center for HMong Studies at Concordia University St. Paul, include *Poj Koob Yawm Ntxwv* (ancestors), which focuses on how we as human beings relate to each other. It begins with the premise that we do not believe in God, but that God believes in us. Many believe that this group venerates all mothers. Many of the elements are simply a revival of another religious practice that took place after the Vietnam War in Laos. It was called *Dlaab/Dab Caub Fab*, or

Prince of the Sky Spiritism. The New Shamanism believes in the Chinese goddess of mercy and fertility, Kuan Ying (Guan Ying). Some of the spiritists in the New Shamanism even believe that they are the reincarnated Kuan Ying. The traditional HMong animists make an offering of the first crop to this goddess also. One of the latest movements is Hmongism, which claims to be a simplified version of the traditional religion of the HMong people. On other occasions, the founder claims it to be a new religion. Many of these new movements are derivatives of the traditional beliefs and do have “cult” flavors to them. As the result, many are suffering; families are painfully divided in these religious matters.

People who are heavily involved in Spiritism will experience the following kinds of symptoms. They will say that they are crazy, *vwm*. They have sleep disorders due to the recurring of unusual dreams and/or premonitions. They feel the helpless paralytic bodily experience during sleep, *raug tsuam*. People will say that they see shadows moving. They hear voices and display fears of persecution that people are out to harm them. There are unusual numbers of suicides committed or attempted within one family. The tendency to divorce is accepted as normal by the family. Individuals have paranormal powers, such as knowing what will happen before the event occurs, *pum hab paub ua ntej lawm*. They possess astro-projections (knowing something without having studied it) or *tsi tau nyeem tsi tau kawm los tub paub has tas phoo ntawv has le caag lawm* (claiming to have encounters with extraterrestrials).

These beliefs may sound incredible, inviting a great deal of cynicism, and the Western medical establishment may simply label these symptoms or characteristics as mental illness. We are not saying that there is no mental illness among the HMong people. However, it is important not to ignore the spiritual dimensions. As incredible and skeptical as these symptoms may sound, the bottom line is that people are suffering. It is only by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ with the power of His Holy Spirit that the HMong people can live above the powers of Satan.

It is of paramount importance to recognize that people who are involved in Spiritism, the occult, do not just come out of it. An individual cannot just one day decide to leave. As St. Paul states in Ephesians 6:12 (ESV), “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” It is impossible with human ability to deal with such forces of darkness and evil. This is why it is critically important that the church must be ready to be God’s instrument of deliverance and put on the whole armor of God to stand against the schemes of the devil (v. 11). It is only through the deliverance of the Lord, Jesus Christ, through the power of His Holy Spirit, that one can come out of

Spiritism, the occult, and be free to experience true peace, freedom, forgiveness, life, and real purpose.

People generally do not heed the Gospel and come to Christ unless there is a strong dissatisfaction with the way things are. This has been well documented by the Early Church scholars and missionaries who have worked and/or studied among animistic, pagan societies. It is important for Christians to recognize when people are suffering and to stand ready in a given moment of notice to step in and deliver God's Word of power. When individuals and families that are afflicted by Spiritism have come to a point of hopelessness, realizing that all animistic rituals have been exhausted, they can see that the only option left is Christ's deliverance offered in the context of His church.

“Remedies” that Introduce Their Own Problems

Various paradigms or approaches have been attempted in the history of Christian missions among the HMong people with varying degrees of effectiveness. The following are brief synopses of the three distinct paradigms that historically have been used to address HMong Spiritism:

1. Roman Catholicism—Jesuit Missionary Paradigm

This paradigm was greatly influenced by Karl Rahner's theology, which says that the Spirit of God permeates the whole universe. All religions adhere to the same Spirit, whether they realize it or not. Therefore, it is simply a matter of relabeling to the correct divine name in these religions. The Jesuit missionaries working among the HMong people took this to heart and simply retain many of the animistic rituals. This paradigm opened the way to syncretism among the HMong Catholics. Many families could not completely break from their animistic practices. Many claim to be both Catholics and Animists at the same time without any concern. A break from HMong Spiritism is nearly impossible in this paradigm.

2. The Reformed—Evangelical Paradigm

The greatest challenge with this paradigm has to do with the strong emphasis upon the response to the Gospel rather than the Gospel itself. Much of the effort focuses upon the good works, leading to the heart of Semi-Pelagianism. Although the power of God in Jesus Christ is not denied, the confusion comes as a result of the misunderstanding between the relationship of faith and good works. The burden of breaking from Spiritism rests upon both the individual's ability and the power of Christ. The power of the Gospel alone is thus compromised.

3. The Pentecostal Paradigm

When the surface Christian labels are stripped away from this paradigm, one sees clearly that it doubtlessly parallels the traditional HMong animistic practice of spiritual power manipulation. Therefore, a close look reveals that the function of the pastor/spiritual leader is no different from the role of a shaman. Highly emotional events manipulate the spiritual power, using Christian labels but functioning in the same animistic realm. This paradigm is problematic because the burden rests solely on the human being's ability to manipulate spiritual power to bring about the deliverance sought by the spiritists. It is difficult to break cleanly from Spiritism, because much remains the same and one is easily trapped by Satan. This approach is quite attractive to the animists and spiritists, since it approaches spiritual power in the same way. Therefore, avoiding making spiritual conflict into Christian magic is nearly impossible.

A Scriptural Perspective and Remedy Are Required

These three main approaches, or paradigms, to the question of addressing HMong Spiritism deserve further investigation. All three have a long history among the HMong people throughout the world. Their perceived successes and failures will provide helpful missiological insights to the all-important question of how one may approach such a penetrating issue and subject as Spiritism. Up to this point, the approaches have been, for the most part, sociological and religious rather than biblical and missional.

From the biblical and missional approach, one sees that the way of the cross, when properly applied, has all the "ingredients" to address the question of HMong Spiritism. First of all, suffering is not something that the way of the cross avoids or shies away from. It deals head-on with suffering. Spiritism is clearly related to the matter of suffering, as we have established in this article from the outset. The way of the cross tackles the challenge directly. At the same time, the way of the cross opens up only one option to remedy this problem, namely the grace of God. It leaves no room for any syncretistic or human idea that human beings can actually do something about it.

Luther, in his journey to rediscover the Gospel, simply emphasizes over and over again that we can only come to God through suffering and the cross. The paradoxical side of suffering is that it opens up our hearts for the Gospel to enter. Only in this context can we truly confess the Word of God to take our cross and follow Him (Mk 8:34) and rejoice in our suffering (Rom 5:3-4). Therefore, Luther's profound understanding of faith is quite helpful in this context, especially that faith comes out of existential knowledge instead of cognitive knowledge. This is how

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most of the world learns best and understands faith: through the channel of orality, the narratives of life. As we deal with suffering intimately, the cross shines brightly for us to see God's grace and mercy. And the Gospel works its power mightily in overcoming the darkness of Spiritism.

All people who are caught in the darkness of HMong Spiritism will come to the point of hopelessness sooner or later, as the suffering mounts to the point of being unbearable. The Christians must stand ready with the armor of God and proclaim the pure Gospel. It is in these profound suffering moments that Satan's chains are broken and the grace of Christ enters in such an undeniable and salvific way. Similar to the New Testament context, a HMong individual and family that practices Spiritism will not consider Christianity unless the conversion, radically, "presupposes some kinds of strong prior dissatisfaction with the way things are," as Wayne Meek notes in his book, *The First Urban Christian: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*.⁴ For a HMong individual and family, "Conversion was a crisis experience, a transfer from absolute darkness to absolute light."⁵

These two statements describe the HMong context succinctly. So, what does it mean in a biblical, missional, and practical way? It means that we take the rite of Baptism seriously. It begins with renouncing the devil, all his works, and all his ways, crystal clearly. In fact, there ought to be a pre-baptismal service of deliverance immediately when a family is ready to confess Christ, the truth, and renounce the false, the devil. For the HMong, outwardly, it means that all animistic paraphernalia are dismantled and destroyed, paralleling the setting up the stone of witness in the days of Joshua and the burning of their books by Ephesian magicians. These actions were not individualistic in nature, but communal.

The HMong society by nature is communal. There is no doubt that there is a strong pull for the younger generations to become a part of the autonomous individualistic society in America. However, this change has not been able to take place successfully, mostly because of the identity crisis process that has not resolved itself. Regardless, they are still a part of the communal society. In many cases, at the very least, a third communal culture has formed as the result of no longer fitting neatly into the first culture, yet at the same time not finding a good fit with the second culture completely either. When a family turns to God as a family, then the lapse or reversion into the old way of life is less likely. Every generation must be reached for Christ. Often, this means within the same one family.

We have seen this conflict played out clearly for more than a decade of intentional ministry among people who have been struggling with Spiritism. When only one member of the family comes to Christ, he or she tends to not last very long in the church before reverting to the old way of life. When a family as a whole comes to Christ, the protection from a lapse into the old way is much greater and

they are less likely to fall into syncretism or some form of pluralism. Paul writes to the Corinthians who had this challenge: “You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord’s table and the table of demons” (1 Cor 10:21). This conflict is the ultimate test in today’s missional work among the HMong people in America. The table of demons comes in more ways than the traditional religious practice or any derivative of it. Spiritism of any form is truly the table of demons.

The story of a former-shaman-turned-evangelist is a good demonstration of God’s grace and mercy in rescuing him and his family from the stronghold of Spiritism. He came from the generation in Laos that had the opportunity to be educated under the French system in Indochina. The usual assumption is that people that had this level of education should not fall into Spiritism.

Life in America did not turn out to be easy either. The American dream had taken its toll as well by forcing the family to work multiple jobs at the same time to get ahead in the new land. Therefore, both husband and wife diligently focused on making the new life in America as productive as possible. The family has always practiced the traditional animistic religion that has been passed from one generation to the next.

However, Spiritism hit him and the family very hard seventeen years ago. The suffering, oppression, affliction, and the constant fear were so intense that the only way to find any relief from this affliction was to turn shamanic. Becoming a shaman is not by choice; one must be chosen, and there is no manual to learn how to be a shaman and how to perform all the rituals that are expected. A new shaman must be guided by a seasoned shaman and the spirits. And so he experienced all the symptoms of Spiritism: feeling crazy, problems with sleeping due to premonitions, possessing paranormal powers, astro-projections, and so on. He even developed a HMong logographic writing system overnight that to this day, even now that he has become a strong Christian, he still recognizes and is able to write in. It resembles the traditional Chinese, Japanese, and Korean writing system. But to his frustration, it is not recognized by any of the Far Eastern logographic languages. On top of all the spiritual sufferings, he endured a stroke as well.

The wife was at a loss; she did not know what to make of her husband, even though she herself was a devout animist in the traditional sense of the religion. This new “craziness” was beyond her comprehension.

Thanks and praise be to God for His grace and mercy upon this man and his family. He began to listen to the Light of Life, the first ever HMong radio programming in the U.S., radio broadcasts that we (Pastor Kou Seying was the speaker and Maykou Seying was the host/announcer) put on weekly for eleven years.

Unlike other Christian programs that he had heard but had no particular interest in, this radio program was different according to his recollection. He heard the saving good news of Jesus. When a new ministry started in his town, he became a part of the original leadership core group. Casting away the spirits was his first priority prior to the big baptismal event that took place on Easter Sunday eight years ago. The family was baptized along with other families and individuals for a total of more than 35 Baptisms and confirmations. The entire family became Christians. The Holy Spirit called him and his family by the Gospel; it was dramatic and radical. The service of deliverance was quite moving, as his animistic paraphernalia and his enormous well-organized animistic altar were dismantled and destroyed, burned to ashes. The tears of JOY were unstoppable; the sense of freedom from Satan's bondage cannot be expressed adequately in words. Today, he and his wife are our strongest evangelists. They are not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power unto salvation for them in a prolific way.

In summary, the following are steps to keep in mind in reaching out to those who are under this thick cloud of darkness, called HMong Spiritism:

1. Recognize that these people are suffering, afflicted, oppressed, and in constant fear despite the exotic nature of Spiritism under the disguise of traditional religion.
2. Recognize that Spiritism is a diabolical possession of one form or another and it is idolatry—worshipping creation rather than the Creator.
3. Use the natural lines of relationship of the HMong society to help identify those who are suffering under this darkness of Spiritism in order for an effective outreach.
4. Be ready as Christians at all times, with the armor of God, to bring about the deliverance that can only come through God's grace and mercy through the power of the Gospel. The church prepares for this by conducting intentional evangelistic leadership training regularly so that there are trained leaders ready to bring the saving Gospel into this dark cloud of Spiritism—turning from darkness to light at a moment's notice.

The footprints of God are everywhere in the traditional HMong belief system, HMong Spiritism: the story of Creation, Adam and Eve, the Flood, the Old Testament sacrificial system, Levitical laws governing marriage, the imposition of ash, and so on. The traditional religious and cultural customs reflect the Old Testament a great deal. These are common areas that are helpful in opening up a fruitful conversation.

HMong Spiritism affects the young, the middle-aged mothers and fathers, the professionals, and the golden age group of grandmothers and grandfathers. No one can escape the effect of Spiritism. It penetrates deeply and devastates the families in

a cyclical manner from which there is no breakthrough unless Christ is the breakthrough.

Our Christian catechetical emphasis on God's grace through faith—that He has rescued us from sins, death, and the devil—has a profound intimate impact on those who have come out of Spiritism. It accentuates and penetrates deeply into the hearts and minds of former spiritists. The hardest sins to overcome are pride and idolatry. Christ's being the once-and-for-all sacrifice is embraced extraordinarily for people with a Spiritism background. Such books as *Jonah* and *Hebrews* resonate profoundly in these new Christians, especially the multiple gods and spirits in *Jonah's* urgent situation. The book of *Hebrews* brings the entire sacrificial concept into a single salvific sacrifice that culminates in the Lamb of God, the person of Jesus Christ, as the ultimate sacrifice. Thus, the oral nature of *Jonah* and *Hebrews* makes the books existentially connecting for those who come out of this dark journey.

Achieving the American dream for many did not bring about the desired happiness that seemed plausible from across the ocean. There are those who, no matter what they have done or not done, the American dream seems unreachable. And then there are those who simply gave up on the dream or never had the dream in the first place. No matter where a HMong individual or family fits into this American scene, apart from life in Christ, Spiritism is the alternative navigating system in the attempt to make sense of life. It is alive and aggressively afflicts many across the generations of HMongs in America.

May the church be ready to stand firm: "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil . . . extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one" (Eph 6:10–11).

Please consult the previous issue of *Missio Apostolica* for further discussion on HMong cosmology and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's mission work among the HMong people of the first two decades of its history: "HMong Mission in LCMS."

Endnotes

¹ Gailyn Van Rheenen, "Conversion: Turning from Darkness to Light," March 14, 2011, www.missiology.org.

² *Spirit of Truth and Spirit of Error*, compiled by Steven Cory (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986).

³ Nusit Chindarsi, *The Religion of the HMong Njua* (The Siam Society: Bangkok, 1976), 17.

⁴ Wayne Meek, *The First Urban Christian: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 184.

⁵ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1991), 317.