

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***



Volume XXVIII, No. 1 (Issue 56) May 2020

# The Evangelization of the HMong: Casting Away the Spirits

Kou Seying

**Abstract:** Prof. Kou Seying’s first concern was always the evangelization of the HMong people. Among the papers found on his computer were the notes and miscellaneous, early, trial drafts dealing with this topic. This paper uses the metaphor, “casting away the spirits,” as the principal term to describe the idea of conversion in HMong culture and finds support for this description of conversion in the Old and New Testaments and also in the Confessional writings of the Lutheran Church.

## I. Scriptural Contribution

“Casting away the spirits” as a way of speaking concerning conversion from HMong animism to Christianity is a way of describing the change from adherence to animistic spirits to adherence to Christ, a change that requires a definite change of life. In my view, the personification of evil, the enemy of the goodness of God, may show itself as a single individual, the Devil or Satan, or it may reveal itself in the countless spirits and demons of the world of the animist. No matter the way in which evil displays itself, its purpose is to separate people from trust in God and lure them into a fearsome world devoid of love and trust, a world in which human feelings are inevitably twisted and alienation from God and from one another is a constant threat. This kind of perverted world can be described as the work of Satan or as the work of the satanic spirits and demons who accompany him and do his work. The contrast between those two worlds and the radical change involved in moving from the world of no trust in God to the world of trust in God is described in Ephesians 2:12–13 (NIV, used in this paper), “remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.” This requires a change of loyalty, of worldview, of citizenship.

In the Book of Joshua, we find a very clear picture of casting away the spirits, “Throw (cast, put, or turn) away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel” (24:23). The Hebrew verb *sura* is the verb used in this text. It has the notion of turning away from false gods. This root is used often to describe the apostasy of Israel. The most common usage in the Hiphil stem has the meaning of “remove.” Throughout the Old Testament, the people of God are urged, as here in Joshua, to remove or “put away” those things that will do spiritual harm to

Copyright 2020 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View Lutheran Mission Matters 28, no. 1 (2020) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://www.lsfm.global/join-the-society-for-missiology/>.

E-mail [lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com) to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

them including false ways and false worship. The adopted Lao word, *gjud*, has captured this basic meaning.

This notion of casting away the spirits for the HMong involves a power encounter as is found in other animistic contexts that have been well documented. The Willowbank Report confirms this point.

Conversion involves a power encounter. People give their allegiance to Christ when they see that his power is superior to magic and voodoo, the curses and blessings of witch doctors, and the malevolence of evil spirits, and that his salvation is a real liberation from the power of evil and death.<sup>1</sup>

Timothy Kamps integrates the various themes of power encounter from various writers in this comprehensive definition:

A power encounter is a spiritual encounter that exposes and calls to account the powers of darkness in their varied forms by the power of God for the purpose of revealing the identity of the one True God resulting in an acknowledgment of and/or allegiance to His lordship by those present.<sup>2</sup>

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

The devil’s work among the HMong people is their adherence to the spirits. Christ came to cast away the spirits and He is casting away the spirits today. This was done at the cross.

This spiritual encounter requires a complete shift of the ultimate allegiance of the human heart. It is clear as the Book of Joshua points out that it requires throwing away the foreign gods. This was demonstrated publicly through the setting up of a stone at Shechem (Josh 24:27) to be a reminder, a witness, to their allegiance to God.

In the New Testament, we find the burning of magical literature in Acts 19:18–19. This was an act of casting away the spirits. The sacred paraphernalia were cast into the fire to be destroyed forever. In HMong epistemology, it means that the old liver (heart) has been replaced by the new. In Acts 19:20, it concludes that as the result of this event, “In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.”

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

For the HMong, coming to the Christian faith means that, as the outward sign of their change of allegiance, their worship paraphernalia are destroyed. This is the equivalent of setting up the stone of witness in the days of Joshua. It parallels the Ephesian magicians burning their books. These accounts were not simply about things individuals did long ago, but they are intended to encourage us now as they report ways that these ancient Christians used to strengthen each other in committing to their new life in Christ in a communal way. The psalmist says, “Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story—those he redeemed from the hand of the foe” (Ps 107:2).

For the HMong, coming to the Christian faith means that, as the outward sign of their change of allegiance, their worship paraphernalia are destroyed. This is the equivalent of setting up the stone of witness in the days of Joshua.

This dramatic outward separation from the old way of life serves as a continuing reminder for people. It is an event for them to recall, memorializing the act of God’s power through His love. In the Book of Joshua, remembering God’s gracious acts is prominently emphasized.

In this sense, Scripture is a book of memories. Memory is an important instrument for protecting against the temptation to lapse into the old ways. This protection comes about not as the result of what someone has done in casting away the spirits, but rather in their recalling the Word of God in that significant event as the power that keeps them from reversion.

Conversion, indeed, becomes the monument of remembrance in life. Thus, conversion is the call to Christ that recalls His cross and resurrection, replacing the original monument of death and eternal damnation under the bondage of Satan, and for adults, this conversion culminates in Baptism.

In addition, the monument of allegiance, their remembrance of the enormous change they have made in turning to Christ, keeps them from falling into syncretism. Paul writes to the Corinthians who had this problem, “You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord’s table and the table of demons” (1 Cor 10:21). This is the ultimate test in today’s mission work

Copyright 2020 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View *Lutheran Mission Matters* 28, no. 1 (2020) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://www.lsfm.global/join-the-society-for-missiology/>.

E-mail [lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com) to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

among the HMong people in America. The table of demons comes to us in more ways than just the traditional religious practice of the HMong. To this must be added the American context with its materialism, secularism, and/or intellectual deconstruction.

One of the keys to understanding the HMong context is the distinction between gods and spirits. In traditional Hmong animist belief, on the one hand, gods are to be worshiped as sovereign beings since they are lords of different territories. On the other hand, spirits represent divine power that almost always can be manipulated by magic or shamanistic acts. In this way, it is clear that the HMong do not worship gods (in the plural). The concept of deities does exist, but they rarely play an influential role in the spiritual life of the people. It is important to recognize that conversion needs to be explained in a way that is understandable in this particular context.

One of the keys to understanding the HMong context is the distinction between gods and spirits. . . . Casting away the spirits is the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the HMong. This casting away is an outward demonstration of God's grace.

In this context, conversion means moving from the false belief that the power of the spirits can be manipulated to Christian belief that accepts the sovereignty of God. In other words, there is a shift from the orb of Satan to the orb of God. The difference is that in the orb of God His power cannot be manipulated. This shift is clearly demonstrated in 1 Kings 18. Clearly, the prophets of Baal desired to manipulate divine power. This is the animistic nature of their act.

It is the shift from the attempt to manipulate divine power to the worship of the sovereign God that Elijah finally demonstrated to the people. In the same way today, the HMong are coming from the realm of manipulation of the power of the spirits to the realm of worshipping the sovereign God.

## **II. Confessional Contribution**

It is not the act of casting away the spirits that causes the conversion. It is clear from God's Word and the Lutheran Confessions that conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word. Luther writes in the Small Catechism, "[baptism] effects forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and grants eternal salvation to all who believe, as the Word and promise of God declare."<sup>3</sup> Casting away the spirits is the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the HMong. This casting away is an outward demonstration of God's grace. It is a necessary event to break that adherence to the spirits and to turn to adherence to Christ.

The usual process for bringing new members into the church begins with a casting away of the spirits service in the home of the family. An important act is to destroy the family's sacred paraphernalia. After this service, arrangement is made for baptism in the church service on Sunday.

Luther, in his baptismal service, has a specific order (exorcism) for casting away the devil. It begins in the collect in which he implores God

drive away from him all the blindness of his heart, break all the snares of the devil with which he is bound, open to him, Lord, the door of thy grace: So that marked with the sign of thy wisdom he may be free of the stench of all evil lusts and serve thee joyfully according to the sweet savor of thy commandments in thy church and grow daily and be made meet to come to the grace of thy baptism to receive the balm of life; through Christ our Lord.<sup>4</sup>

In light of the Gospel, Luther boldly and confidently speaks against the devil in a most direct way. As the order of baptism continues, we find this wonderful prayer for deliverance from Satan:

Therefore, thou miserable devil, acknowledge thy judgment and give glory to the true and living God, give glory to his Son Jesus Christ and to the Holy Ghost, and depart from this N., his servant; for God and our Lord Jesus Christ has of his goodness called him to his holy grace and blessing, and to the fountain of baptism so that thou mayest never dare to disturb this sign of the holy cross which we make on his forehead. . . .

So hearken now, thou miserable devil, adjured by the name of the eternal God and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and depart trembling and groaning, conquered together with thy hatred, so that thou shalt have nothing to do with the servant of God who now seeks that which is heavenly and renounces thee and thy world, and shall live in blessed immortality. . . .

I adjure thee, thou unclean spirit, by the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost that thou come out of and depart from this servant of God, N., for he commands thee, thou miserable one, he who walked upon the sea and stretched forth his hand to sinking Peter.<sup>5</sup>

This clearly shows that casting out the devil was taken very seriously in the days of Luther. In contrast, today we essentially have only one sentence in the baptismal liturgy of Lutheran worship, "Do you renounce the devil and all his works and all his ways?" Luther continues in his Large Catechism, "To be saved, we know, is nothing else than to be delivered from sin, death, and the devil and to enter into the kingdom of Christ and live with him forever."<sup>6</sup> The deliverance theme in Luther's writing is found everywhere and is compatible with the HMong concept of casting away the spirits.

Casting away the spirits is nothing else other than the “change through the Holy Spirit’s activity in the intellect, will, and heart of man whereby man through such working is able to accept the offered grace.”<sup>7</sup> To properly understand the casting away the spirits concept it needs to be clearly rooted in the work of the Holy Spirit. Apart from this, casting away the spirits is not possible.

The Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, Article II continues to discuss the point raised by the Augsburg Confession concerning free will. This, too, sheds light on the concept of casting away the spirits. Apart from Christ, without faith and the Holy Spirit, people are under the power of the devil. This is precisely why the spirits must be cast away in order to be with Christ and have faith in Him. There is no freedom of human will in spiritual matters; “man is the captive of Satan.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the power for human beings to turn to the Gospel or to Christ is the power of the Holy Spirit. This turning to Christ from the captivity of Satan means, in HMong understanding, the casting away of the spirits—that is, Satan.

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession deals extensively with the theme of the devil’s dominion. “There human nature is subjected not only to death and other physical ills, but also to the rule of the devil.”<sup>9</sup> The animists are completely in agreement. The Apology continues to explain that without Christ the devil cannot be conquered. At the same time, humans cannot buy their way out of the power of the devil. It is at this point that the idea of casting away the spirits finds common ground with the Christian confession that resisting the devil is only possible through the power of Christ. The promise to cast away the spirits is the promise that Christ gave through the Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

Luther makes a strong case for daily casting away the devil in the Large Catechism in his explanation of the Third Commandment, emphasizing that we are daily under the dominion of the devil. He emphasizes that the heart must not be idle but must hold on to God’s Word in order to keep the devil away. This sheds a bright light on how conversion works from the human point of view. The heart cannot be filled with both. It is either Christ or the devil.

This helps with the notion of casting the spirits (devil) away so that Christ may fill that void. Clearly from God’s point of view there is one category (Ex 20:2–6). The First Commandment basically says that apart from God Himself, every other spiritual power involves idolatry. Anything that would take the place of God is placed under this one category. It is a rebellion against God as Paul writes in Romans 1:19–25. Whether it is the high religions or the tribal religions among the HMong or any other human religion, it is against God. Casting away the spirits simply means a return to the Lord.

Casting away the spirits is surely an aspect of the Great Commission of our Lord. “Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the

Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19). The commission requires casting away the spirits so that making disciples of all nations is possible. With the rejection of the spirits, Christ becomes the ultimate center of the new worldview.

Finally, casting away the spirits is the casting away of fear that dominates every phase of the life of an animist. It is the fear that consumes the animist’s whole being, both physical and spiritual which ultimately are not separable. Casting away the spirits means, “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear” (1 Jn 4:18). Casting away the spirits is a change from fear to the triumph in Christ, His cross and resurrection.

Casting away the spirits is surely an aspect of the Great Commission of our Lord. . . . Casting away the spirits is the casting away of fear that dominates every phase of the life of an animist.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, *The Willowbank Report: Consultation on Gospel and Culture*, 1978, online at <https://www.lausanne.org/content/lop/lop-2#7>, accessed February, 2, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy James Kamps, *The Biblical Forms and Elements of Power Encounter*. Unpublished Master’s thesis. Columbia Graduate School of Bible and Missions, 1986. Cited in *Communicating Christ among Folk Religionists*, Chapter 4 “Change in Animistic Societies,” accessed February 2, 2020, <http://www.missiology.org/folkreligion/chapter4.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Theodore Tappert, ed. *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 348:6.

<sup>4</sup> *Luther’s Works, Vol. 53: Liturgy and Hymns*, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 96.

<sup>5</sup> LW 53:97–98.

<sup>6</sup> Tappert, 439:25.

<sup>7</sup> Solid Declaration, Art. II, Tappert, 537:83.

<sup>8</sup> Tappert, 527:30.

<sup>9</sup> Tappert, 106:46.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Tappert, 537:83.

This article was edited for *Lutheran Mission Matters* by Dr. Daniel L. Mattson.