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Hmong Statement of Belief: A Case Study

Introduction

The Hmong are part of the Meo (or Miaw) tribal groups who have, beginning late in the 18th century, slowly migrated from South China to the rugged high lands of Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and Eastern Burma. About 2.7 million still live in China and about 1.2 million have migrated to these other countries.

Since the mid-1970s many Hmong have moved to the United States, fleeing persecution and instability. These Hmong that have moved to the United States mostly come from Laos and Thailand. One factor that has led to their migration has been the fact that politically they have mostly allied themselves with the anti-communist groups in Laos. As a consequence the communist government has considered them enemies. Most still follow their traditional religion of animism and shamanism. Because so much of their lives was dominated by fear of evil spirits, the spiritual freedom that Jesus offered was especially meaningful to them.

The interchange with the Hmong, which led to the statement of belief presented in this paper, took place during the mid-1970s and is based on the Hmong population of North Thailand and Laos.

My family arrived as missionaries in Chiang Mai, North Thailand in 1968. Soon we became interested in the Hmong as we saw them in their unique garb during their visits to the market and surrounding town. As we visited them in their villages we found families who were eager to renounce their traditional religion. They decided that the freedom Jesus offered was much better than being slaves of the spirits. They wanted a change; however, they had no Christian knowledge or literature available to them at that time.

Having recently graduated from mission training at the Institute of World Mission, I had learned the importance of contextualizing for the

purpose of communicating the gospel; therefore, I, along with Pastor Leng and several other Hmong leaders, decided it would be a good thing to formulate a belief statement for new believers so they could begin to understand more clearly what Christianity was all about.

Language and Terminology

This eleven-point statement is not a translation of some earlier document in another language. Belief statements exist in English and Thai and other languages but they did not communicate well when translated for the Hmong. The question that we were trying to answer was, What are the key elements of Christian faith that Hmong believers need to understand, believe, and follow?

The Hmong had a term for the high God but knew little about him. We decided that the Hmong term for the high God was fluid enough that it could be used to describe the Christian God. That meant the belief statement would talk about someone whom the Hmong were familiar with but did not know much about. What we tried to do was fill a somewhat familiar term with Christian meaning.

The Hmong also had a name we felt could be used for Satan. Spirits for the Hmong were ordered in hierarchies. At the head of the hierarchy was the great cow spirit—Satan.

It also seemed to us that confessional/catechism type of statement that came in the form of question and answer would be the easiest to communicate among them. What follows is the eleven point question (Q) and answer (A) statement called “The Way of Faith” followed by my brief comments (C). These are simple statements we felt it was important for them to understand, believe, and practice.

The Way of Faith

1. Q: *Who created the world?*

A: I believe that God (Hmong name for God) created the world, animals, and humans in six days.

C: This statement emphasizes the fact that God, whose name they know but do not understand, made everything they see in their world in six days. Hmong traditions contain many Old Testament stories.

2: Q: *What is this Creator God like?*

A: I believe that He has greater power than Satan, spirits, and people. He loves us because he created us and is our heavenly Father.

C: Not only is God the Creator, he also has supreme power. Fear of the spirits governs the everyday life of the Hmong and knowing that God has

power over Satan and his spirits is a great relief. God also loves us. This is a new revelation to people who fear divine power and usually avoid interaction with God.

3: *Q: How should we worship this God we speak of?*

A: I believe that we honor and worship God when we sing and pray together and remember his creation by resting on the seventh day as he gave us an example.

C: Once one believes that God is great and loving, we must ask the question about what our response to this God should be. We honor and worship him through song, prayer, and Sabbath observance. From day one we taught people to sing and pray. Prayer was greatly appreciated because it was the way to tap into God's power and fight the evil forces. Singing songs did much the same. Hmong women loved the Sabbath because normally they worked every day. To have a day of rest that was ordered by God enabled them to have a much needed day of rest and change.

4: *Q: What was the world like, which God created?*

A: I believe that the world which God created was beautiful. Evil, sickness, poverty, suffering, and death were not present.

C: See question 5 for comment

5: *Q: Why then is the world today full of sickness, suffering and death?*

A: I believe that because humanity disobeyed God this caused all kinds of evil to spread over all of us.

C: Beliefs four and five are meant to explain the situation in our world today and explain why good and evil things happen. This forms the basis for the plan of Salvation and the role of Jesus as Savior.

6: *Q: Who has the authority and power to help us escape evil and judgment?*

A: I believe that because God loved us he sent the divine Savior Jesus to help us escape from sin and the grasp of the evil spirits.

C: Here, Jesus as Savior is introduced as the answer to the sin problem and the one who frees people from the evil spirits. Further statements fill out this idea in more detail.

7: *Q: How does our divine Savior Jesus help us escape from evil, punishment, and the grasp of the devil?*

A: I believe that because our divine Savior Jesus died in our place on the cross he has the power to help us. If we believe in our divine Savior Jesus and discard and renounce our spirit beliefs then Jesus will help us escape from evil and will wash our hearts, making them white and new. He will not allow the spirits to have any power over us.

C: Here the death of Jesus for our sin is introduced. At this point the story of Jesus and the cross needs to be told. Now people are called to leave their spirit worship and believe in Jesus as Savior and Deliverer.

8. Q: *Will we always live on this earth or will we go somewhere else?*

A: I believe that if we believe in our divine Savior, Jesus, and wait for him, he will return and take us to live with him in the new heavenly city he is preparing. We will live forever there and all sickness, pain, crying, and death will be no more.

C: This statement teaches concerning the second coming and heaven, thus giving hope for the future.

9: Q: *If we die before our Savior Jesus returns how will we rise from the dead?*

A: I believe that when Jesus returns the second time he will bring us back to life and give eternal life with no more death.

C: We should not only believe in Jesus and his resurrection but his coming back to life also gives us hope as the basis for our resurrection. We do not need to fear death if we accept this Jesus.

10: Q: *As we await the return of Jesus how should we live?*

A: I believe that we should live as Jesus taught us. We should love one another and join in teaching the Jesus message to those who do not know it. We should live by the Ten Commandments and keep our bodies clean. We should not use opium or tobacco, drink liquor, or eat the meat which God has not given us permission to eat. We will give a tithe of our earnings to help spread the message of God to the whole world.

C: After we accept Jesus, and await his return there is a new life we need to live. Some key elements of this life are spelled out in this statement. In addition to some of the typical Adventist issues of healthy living and tithing, this belief states the missionary imperative to witness to others.

11: Q: *What should we do to keep close to God and avoid falling into sin?*

A: I believe that we should daily sing, pray, and study God's message.

C: At the time this was written, most of the Hmong lived in small, isolated villages that were 100% Hmong. Most were illiterate but they could gather daily to sing and pray together. This belief is meant to be practiced individually and corporately.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does this statement differ from traditional statements of belief?
2. What beliefs should be added or subtracted? Why?
3. Is creating a statement like this valid?
4. What would a statement of faith similar to this look like in 21st century North America.

Key Missiological Implications of the Hmong Case Study

This case study exploring the Hmong statement of belief is more than just a story. Embedded and implied in it are certain key missiological principles which should be considered any time a particular belief statement is framed. Specifically, it assumes that the gospel must be presented in ways that are culturally relevant. Responsible communicators must adapt their message so that it can communicate the gospel to their intended audience with clarity and power. A missionary must prayerfully consider both *how* the truths of Scripture can be best articulated in a new cultural context, as well as just *what* truths ought to be presented.

It may appear to some that calling for such adaptation is dangerous because it will “water down” the truths of the Bible. There are, however, at least four bits of counsel that ought to guide everyone who attempts to articulate statements of belief in diverse cultural contexts.

1. Cross-cultural workers need to remind themselves of the simple, unavoidable fact that *all belief statements are produced in a particular context*. That context has to do with the time or historical situation and the specific culture of all parties involved. Acknowledging this fact should help God’s witnesses to be more intentional about listening carefully to the local context before beginning the difficult work of formulating belief statements.

2. Cross-cultural workers ought to remind themselves that the writers of a statement of belief and their audience *both have their own unique cultural perspectives*. Too often those who are stating or explaining beliefs assume they must understand the culture of their audience but they forget that their own context must be understood and recognized as well.

3. This process cannot be rushed, because *the clearer the understanding of the context the more powerful and appropriate the resulting statements will be*. Unfortunately many times writers of statements hastily look at the context and do not understand it in depth before they begin their actual writing.

4. Finally, God’s people must recognize that this process of contextualizing our message never ends. *Over time, contexts change and so should the statements*. This does not mean that foundational beliefs should be forgotten, but rather, that the way they are stated will need to change if we want the truth to be readily understood. The truth we share should not merely be an old truth, presented in the same old way. Instead, we are to share present truth in ways that make sense to people in their own cultural context. This is what it means to be a faithful witness for Christ.

Conclusion

About 40 years have passed since this statement of belief was written, many changes have occurred among the Hmong. They have increasingly been influenced by the Thai and Laos cultures that surround them. Some change has also occurred in the church. This means that if the statement was written today there would be some differences and probably some additions like the Lord's Supper, and baptism.

Although the Hmong are a very small percentage of the total Thai population, they are the largest ethnic percentage group in the Thai Adventist Church.



Jon has a passion that the gospel of Jesus go to every nation tribe and people. In pursuit of that goal he has served as a pioneer missionary as well as a teacher of mission and a writer on mission topics.