

Revisiting a Case Study of Hmong Refugees and Ontario Mennonites

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When I was in the first year of my doctoral studies, a professor friend mentioned that a group of Laotian Hmong had resettled in Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario and as if that wasn't enough, they had converted to Mennonitism. This seemed like an anthropologist's dream come true – not just one but two exotic groups. Of course, a few trips to Kitchener-Waterloo revealed a great deal more complexity than I had anticipated. For example, the assumptions I harbored about Mennonites as the “plain people” and about Laotian Hmong as solely animist and preliterate refugees were quickly laid bare and promptly laid to rest. The internal complexities of Mennonite communities revealed themselves in such areas as church governance (e.g., Mennonite Conference of Ontario and Quebec, General Conference Mennonite Church, Mennonite Brethren), religious practice, styles of observance, dress and life ways, ethnicity and history and language, to name a few. For the Hmong, differences were more readily apparent through their language, kinship and political organization specifically through clan associations, their cultural traditions and customs, political allegiances and religious faith – from animism to evangelical Christianity. To make sense of the relationships that exist between these two seemingly disparate groups was a big challenge.

What initially attracted me to Kitchener-Waterloo was that Mennonites and Hmong were two groups that seemed as different as night and day – worlds apart socially, economically, religiously and culturally. As a non-Mennonite, I found this convergence fascinating because of what it tells us about the relationships between religion, culture, community and identity. My research began on what was then referred to as the “Mennonite identity crisis” (Redekop and Steiner, 1988) in the mid 1980s. Rather than being symbiotic, tightly knit communities rejecting “worldly influences,” particularly in the case of Swiss South-German Mennonites, they were constantly having to negotiate these pressures, however defined. But, as with other enclavic groups like Hasidic Jews the need to remain distinct and apart entails more cognizance, engagement and understanding of the so-called outside world than one would expect. Furthermore,

the need to articulate the essence of Mennonite peoplehood was symptomatic of the changes that the community was experiencing. The case study I used to explore the nuances of this process was the conversion of non-traditional adherents – specifically Indochinese refugees – and the effects it had on the Mennonite community in Kitchener-Waterloo. What was its impact on the negotiation of meanings of Mennonite peoplehood and the “universal community of believers”?

Hmong Mennonites

Members of the Hmong ethnic group and other Indochinese refugees came to Canada as a result of the Boat People Crisis of the 1970s (Adelman 1980, Tepper 1980). The response of Mennonites through the MCC and local churches was to bring over “hard-to-settle” Indochinese refugees through a joint sponsorship program. This was a response to an international crisis and to some degree Kitchener-Waterloo Mennonites, although very committed to the idea and the practice of service, were not prepared for what would come either pragmatically in terms of the difficulties and logistics of resettlement or, more significantly, for the challenges to thinking about what being Mennonite means. These newcomers presented numerous, often daunting challenges, linguistically, culturally and socially. The resettlement experience was, furthermore, not the same as for Mennonites working in overseas communities. These people were coming to build lives under the stewardship, albeit temporary, and guidance of Mennonites. In the midst of this influx Mennonites were grappling with questions of outreach, church conferences were merging and the demographic profile of Mennonite churches was beginning to change. These challenges to the configuration of Mennonite peoplehood were accelerated and exacerbated by the issues raised through the inclusion of these newcomers in Mennonite communities. The boundaries of Mennonitism were seemingly in flux. For the newly arrived Hmong, however, radical and profound change was the norm. War, dislocation and loss had characterized the experiences of Hmong refugees and many looked to Christianity as a source of comfort and hope. Mennonites provided a safe haven not only by opening their hearts and homes, but also by their faith.

The central focus of my research has always been an interest in the cultural reproduction of group identities and the production of meaning, so in revisiting the research I began twenty years ago I began to wonder about whether or how I would look at things differently now. There are myriad ways in which to assess the impact of resettlement and religious change both conceptually and ethnographically. There is a great deal of literature that deals with intercultural linkages and the processes involved in religious change. The interface between

Hmong and Mennonites, however, presents unique opportunities to examine how such seemingly diverse communities find sources of commonality and develop affinities that are not based on similarities defined culturally, socially or religiously. For example, one contemporary perspective that proves to be useful in thinking about the Hmong-Mennonite context is one that emphasizes *difference*, that is, highlighting points of similarity and contrast between all sorts of social categories (classes, genders, groups and nations) rather than differences *between* people per se, and the challenges that both Hmong and Mennonites share in an increasingly globalized and transnational world. The focus on difference brings to our attention the difficulties in categorizing identities as religious, cultural and/or ethnic in our efforts to understand contexts such as those presented here. A natural way to assess the impact of Hmong and Mennonite interaction is to examine differences between them – cultural, social and otherwise – and then to proceed to examine how they negotiate these differences. But to focus on perspectives that are concerned, for example, with ethnic versus religious identity ignores the fact that there is much more involved in the process of social change and identity production than those factors that fall under the purview of these exclusive categories. To begin by thinking about the case of Mennonites and Hmong from the vantage point of distinct and particularistic religious and cultural traditions limits the scope and range of analytical possibilities.

These limitations are best illustrated through an examination of traditional sociological ways of looking at identity via notions of retention and change. For example, according to theorists of ethnicity in Canada, ethnic identity entails positive and personal attachments to a group or to traditions (Driedger, Isajiw 1974). Approaches such as these are usually framed by pluralist frameworks that routinely stress the cultural vitality and contributions of immigrant/minority groups in a multicultural society. Areas of focus concentrate largely on familiar themes of ethnic persistence/retention and incorporation. Among the measures used to gauge these processes are demographic trends in mother tongue retention, patterns of endogamy, occupation, residential concentrations, intergenerational changes in ethnic identification, and adherence to ethnic customs and traditions. The themes around which much of this scholarship revolves are those of persistence of community and incorporation. A similar logic holds true for faith communities. While the vast amount of research produced on these indicators has contributed to our general knowledge of identity as an organizing principle, it has lagged behind in problematizing the theoretical assumptions upon which analyses of identity have been based. What is most problematic is mounting evidence that points to the difficulty of isolating specific

forms of identity for analytical purposes. The danger of course is that of categorizing different groups, in this case both Hmong and Mennonites, in terms of culture and religious traditions as discrete, self-contained and comprehensive entities. There is a tremendous amount of diversity in Mennonite expressions of peoplehood. A brief glance at the demographic profile of Mennonite church members is a place to start. But even the assumption of theological and doctrinal uniformity of Mennonitism emphasizing the persistence of core Anabaptist teachings often glosses over ongoing internal tensions between, for example, separatist/sectarianist and progressive/activist philosophical positions aimed at responding to the contemporary challenges. It also overlooks the debate over congregational and episcopal church polities. Diversity, then, is not outside the purview of faith and doctrinal beliefs.

In the less textually based realm of social relations Mennonites have had to cope with differences both within their own congregations and communities and as part of their missions to non-Mennonites. In fact, Mennonites have been dealing with these complexities in daily practice, but I would argue that they have not analyzed them sufficiently in relation to their core beliefs. What drives home the need to reconsider the categorization of identities – as for example, Hmong or Mennonite identities – is the shift in thinking locally to thinking globally. Central to the work of Mennonites is the intensification of outreach and service to non-Mennonites internationally. Communication and networking is central to all those who engage in relief efforts and service abroad. The impact of Hmong sponsorship on this Mennonite community, I would argue, has been not only to deepen and broaden faith commitments to Christian principles but to the meaning of peoplehood itself. Greater engagement with non-traditional adherents has been difficult for those Mennonites unaccustomed to cultural, social and religious diversity (by virtue of living in close knit communities defined by church and neighbourhood). What Mennonites have increasingly come to share with their non-European Christian counterparts are affinities based on faith rather than culture and custom.

One manifestation of the dramatic changes in the configuration of political, social and economic relations worldwide has been the profound change in the ways in which we think about culture, ethnicity and religion. This is increasingly evident in the case of trans-national religion where new forms of religious identification are continuously emerging. Group boundaries are continually reconfigured and often blurred, and this inevitably has an impact on the conceptualization of mission and message for Mennonites in their overseas service efforts.

A perspective informed by globalization is important in the

Mennonite case because in a post-modern world like ours individuals and groups are increasingly drawn into an ever-expanding and often perplexing array of networks and linkages. Mennonites, who interface with other like-minded co-religionists, activists and service providers, are at the centre of local, national and international peace and service efforts. The mandate of advocacy and service organizations like the Mennonite Central Committee (“relief, development, peace”: www.mcc.org) requires sophisticated and extensive networking with other non-governmental organizations, international agencies and governments. It seems only natural then that an interpretive framework that emphasizes globalization provides the foundation for analysis of contemporary Mennonite studies. By rethinking the naturalizing logics of, for example, community, ethnicity and even religion, we begin to fully appreciate the complex nature of contemporary global processes and their impact on the (re)construction of ethnic, religious or other identities.

It is within this conceptual and analytical context that the relationships between Mennonites and Hmong can be productively examined. Mennonites were involved with the Hmong beginning with their relief work in Thai refugee camps and in sponsorship to Canada. At its most basic level the resources that Mennonites have made available to Indochinese refugees in Canada include education, literacy and jobs, as well as support services both within and outside of the church community. Among the settlement services they have provided they have also given many Hmong the opportunity to experience empowerment and some degree of autonomy in Canada (cf. Winland, 1987, 1994 on Hmong-Mennonite women). In these ways, though, there is nothing particularly unique about the involvement of Mennonites as a faith community in the lives of refugees. Faith communities often take a pro-active role in helping those in need and their record in the case of Indochinese refugees is admirable. But unlike other service providers, faith communities provide another essential resource – that of spiritual support and guidance – and in this way the Mennonite-Hmong experience has been unique.

For the Hmong, a group that has experienced a recent history of trauma and suffering, Christianity, first introduced in the late 1940s in Southeast Asia, attracted them because of the certainty afforded by a strict adherence to certain ideas, traditions and, as time wore on, explanations for the tragedies that had befallen them. Christian relief workers then provided them not only with safe haven and shelter, but with much needed emotional and spiritual support. In many cases, this led to conversion in the camps with more converting upon resettlement in Canada. But conversion to Christianity also signalled conversion from a belief system by specifically making a break with the past, most significantly with central tenets of Hmong

traditional beliefs (e.g., the spirits of the ancestors). This, however, sometimes led to rifts within families and between clans. For some who joined the Mennonite church difficulties with family members and members of the non-Christian Hmong community were major sources of conflict and tension. Nevertheless, there were those who were willing to endure family disapproval for their decision to follow Christianity. However, the transformation was not complete.

Continuity and Change

The continuities between Christian practices and teaching and those of the Hmong stood out in the research that I conducted with members of the Hmong-Mennonite faith community. For example, the notion of sacrifice has traditionally been very strong for Hmong, specifically spirit sacrifice. The parallels between the Hmong and Christian principles of sacrifice were cited as a key component of their commitment to the Christian faith. Although otherwise conceptualized and practised in Laos, the Christian notion of sacrifice resonated very deeply for many Hmong.

The significance of sacrifice for Hmong and its relationship to Christian belief harkens back to the early days of Christian missionary influence in Laos and Thailand, when many found solace in the millennial vision of the coming of Christ. Hmong long held the belief that they were plagued by evil spirits (*tlan*) as a result of having been abandoned by the legendary Hmong king, Fua Tai. They interpreted missionary efforts as evidence of their return to favour because Jesus had become interested in the Hmong and would liberate them from the powerful effects of the *tlan* (cf. Winland, 1992a). The symbolic power of Christian teachings was thus in evidence well in advance of the efforts of Mennonites to sponsor and support Hmong.

In Kitchener-Waterloo, Hmong Mennonites engaged in a ritual of separation under the advice of the pastor of the Mennonite church in Kitchener-Waterloo that housed the Hmong congregation. This entailed taking a personal possession and burning it as a symbol of the break with the spiritual past. For some Hmong the meaning of Christian observance was a very strict and literal one. According to one Hmong Mennonite I spoke with, "Anyone who doesn't receive the spirit Christ will go directly to hell." While the message of Christ that Hmong Mennonites received from Mennonite teachings was certainly not this dire, there were those who were committed to this principle wholeheartedly. The majority, however, accepted a less doctrinaire approach to Mennonite teachings. The receptivity of Indochinese refugees to Christianity has been characterized by many as symptomatic of the "rice bowl Christian" phenomenon, where refugees seized upon the opportunity to convert in order to acquire greater access to the material rewards of membership. But

to interpret the actions and beliefs of deeply devoted Hmong as the result of the influence and/or pressure of their Mennonite hosts/sponsors or conversely to attribute it to refugee gratitude expressed through conversion, is to rob Hmong Mennonites of agency and empowerment. The Hmong I worked with who chose to convert did so of their own choosing: their decisions and the foundation of their commitment were genuine. However, they may not have chosen to convert for reasons reflecting the same conception of faith as that of the majority of their Mennonite sponsors: that is, one informed by Christian notions of fellowship, outreach and service. This is not to say that Hmong conversion is based on a misreading or a watering down of the Mennonite Christian message. Religious belief is by its very nature fluid and constantly responding to change. Even within the doctrinal confines of Christian teachings there is room for improvisation.

Despite the renunciation of ancestor worship and other forms of Hmong spirituality, there is a continued belief in traditional spirits, and although they may now reject sacrificial offerings they retain beliefs in animism. All traditions, religious, ethnic or otherwise, are by nature fluid: they bend and borrow from each other and are influenced by and influence others. Affinities are sought out and built upon, intentionally or not. Sometimes it is not in the actual belief systems where parallels and similarities are found but rather in the similar histories of groups. Both Mennonites and Hmong have had a history of oppression and of flight. The Hmong frequently made comments to me about the shared histories of suffering and persecution of both Mennonites and Hmong. The boundaries between what are seen to be distinct traditions, ethnicities and religious traditions are not impermeable.

Part of the reason for the misapprehensions concerning religious differences is the assumption that religious change is unidirectional - from the missionary to the missionized. This process is thus frequently portrayed as an unbalanced process with the exotic "Other" capitulating to the forces of modernity. Critics of colonialism have thus frequently condemned Christianity as the handmaiden of colonialism. However, the process is seldom evaluated from the perspective of the converted, or as a complex and multi-dimensional process. The results of the research I conducted twenty years ago demonstrated that many Hmong Mennonites were committed Christians, and it is important to investigate how and in what ways they reconciled their new faith with the old.¹ Over the course of their recent and in many ways traumatic past Hmong have had to cope with radical change involving displacement, suffering and loss. Nonetheless, they display a tremendous capacity to rebuild their lives and to do so by finding meaning and purpose however and wherever they can. Although

some parallels can be drawn between traditional Hmong beliefs and aspects of Mennonite faith, it becomes problematic to extrapolate from these apparent commonalities (due in part to different cultural and historical conceptions of religion, faith and practice) other than to say that Hmong Mennonites find what they need or crave in their current circumstances.

The power of contemporary perspectives that foreground the problems with over-determined and dominant constructs makes it easier to think more creatively about the process of religious engagement. A perspective informed by the lessons of globalization makes this possible. Furthermore, a consideration of the role of *difference* rather than *differences* producing distinctive religious and cultural practices and outlooks, resists the tendency to narrowly focus on what separates rather than the wealth of affinities which in the case of Hmong and Mennonites unites.

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Notes

- 1 There is now a First Hmong Mennonite church in Kitchener-Waterloo whereas in the early 1980s, Hmong were members of the Hmong Church, then the Hmong Christian Church (Mennonite) using the facilities of the First Mennonite Church.