

FOLLOW THE NEW WAY

# *Follow the New Way*

AMERICAN REFUGEE  
RESETTLEMENT POLICY AND  
HMONG RELIGIOUS CHANGE

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*For Beata and Greg*

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FOLLOW THE NEW WAY

## *Introduction*

Every year, the members of the Hmong Christian Church of God in Minneapolis, Minnesota, gathered for a cherished event: a “Thanksgiving celebration.” Unlike other Thanksgiving observances in the United States, this day of worship, praise, and commemoration occurred in early May, in remembrance of the turbulent days in May 1975 when the US military evacuated thousands of people from Long Cheng, an airbase at the center of the CIA-backed Secret War. Nor did the celebration focus on the story of English Pilgrims seeking refuge in America. Instead, the church celebrated God’s deliverance of a different group of people who came to America in search of safety and freedom: Hmong refugees.

If the *Mayflower* symbolizes the English Pilgrims’ story, the Hmong Christian Church of God chose a more modern symbol of their passage: an airplane, which figures prominently on the cover of the 1991 program for the church’s fifteenth annual Thanksgiving service. Superimposed on a globe, the oversized jetliner appears to depart from Southeast Asia, where the figure of a Hmong man stands proudly alongside the Christian flag. It heads toward North America, where another Hmong man bearing an American flag offers a simple greeting: “Welcome to U.S.” The image offers a decidedly religious narrative of Hmong refugee migration. Above the airplane





Program cover for the Hmong Christian Church of God 1991 Thanksgiving celebration. Courtesy of the family of Rev. Young Tao.

and atop the globe is a large crucifix, under which we read the joyful declaration, “Thanks God for the saving of life,” and emblazoned on the side of the airplane are well-known words from John 14:6: “I am the way.”

The program cover uses a single image to tell three distinct stories about why this church set aside a day every year to offer prayers and songs of thanksgiving. First, it tells a providential narrative of Hmong resettlement in the United States. Looking back on their exodus from Laos, devoutly Christian Hmong refugees often describe their journey as the result of direct divine intervention. It was God, they say, who delivered the Hmong people to the United States, where they could enjoy a future of freedom and security. “Hmong never known that, [*sic*] they will come to America,” declared Rev.

Young Tao, the church pastor, “but, by God’s plan and His merciful [*sic*] we are here in wonderful country of the United States of America.”

At the same time, the image of the airplane makes a second point: the American government and Christian churches worked together to resettle thousands of Hmong and other Southeast Asian refugees in the United States. After the Vietnam War, the government relied on religious voluntary agencies, congregations, and church-affiliated charities to provide abundant money, manpower, and material resources that were essential to national and local resettlement efforts. For this reason, the church gathered to thank not only God but also “the Government of the United States, the Governor of Minnesota and all those in authority under him, and the kind citizens of Minnesota who through their gracious generosity have assisted us to a happily resettle here in this wonderful State.” The congregation also expressed thanks for “the agencies, Churches, sponsors, and friends who have shared willingly with us and have provided us with the necessities of the life such as food, clothing[,] furnitures, and housing.” Concluding the statement of gratitude, which the celebrants read every year, was a simple declaration: “Thanks [to] the US government for the saving of our lives.”<sup>1</sup>

The image tells one final story, perhaps less obvious but no less important. For many Hmong Americans, migrating to the United States was also an experience of spiritual crossing, one that introduced Hmong people to the belief that Jesus is “the way.” Resettlement in the United States produced a wide array of changes in Hmong spiritual and religious life, including the decision by many Hmong people to join Christian churches and adopt Christian beliefs, practices, and identities. Not only do many Hmong Christians believe that they came to the United States because of God, but many also believe that Hmong people came to God because they had come to the United States. For these Hmong refugees, the two journeys were intertwined: making a new home in the United States involved making a new spiritual home in Christianity, a religion Hmong people have translated as *kev cai tshiab*—literally, “the new way.”

That many Hmong Americans have embraced “the new way” of Christianity marks a significant shift. Of the 327,000 Hmong people who reside in the United States today, almost all trace their origins back to Laos.<sup>2</sup> There, the vast majority of Hmong people

practiced a distinctive system of household-based rituals that affirmed their connection to ancestors and kin and facilitated spiritual well-being.<sup>3</sup> They continued these ritual traditions even as the Lao civil war uprooted them from their homes, forced them to flee to neighboring Thailand, and brought them to the United States. An analysis of the case files of refugees resettled by the International Institute of Minnesota indicates that only a fraction—about 16 percent—of Hmong refugees who arrived in the United States between 1976 and 1996 identified as Christian. The vast majority—about 84 percent—identified themselves as non-Christian, primarily as animist or ancestor worshippers.<sup>4</sup>

Four decades later, Christianity has a much greater presence in Hmong American life. In cities across the United States, there are Hmong Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Mormon, Pentecostal, Catholic, and Baptist churches.<sup>5</sup> The Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA), an evangelical Protestant denomination, even has its own national “Hmong District,” which counted 115 Hmong American CMA congregations by 2018.<sup>6</sup> The prominence of Christian communities is especially evident in the Twin Cities, the epicenter of Hmong America. There are dozens of Hmong Christian congregations in Saint Paul and Minneapolis, and the Saint Paul Hmong Alliance Church, which is affiliated with the CMA, counted nearly 3,000 members by 2005.<sup>7</sup> Hmong American Christianity is clearly thriving.

To be sure, estimates of the Christian share of the Hmong American population in the United States range widely, from as low as 30 percent in some communities to as high as 70 percent in others.<sup>8</sup> Precise figures about Hmong religious and spiritual life are not available, for several reasons. For one, counting the number of people in a particular religious group is always a difficult task, especially with a group like the Hmong, who have historically practiced their rituals at home rather than in formal religious institutions. The frequency of religious change and the fluidity of religious identity among Hmong Americans also make the task of tallying religious adherents a challenge.

But even if the exact number of Hmong American Christians is uncertain, this much is clear: Hmong Americans were often talking about—and troubled by—the religious changes that occurred in their community during the first two decades of their resettlement

in the United States. In news media interviews, theatre, and film, they offered frank discussion about the “religious divide” that threatened the integrity of their families and their community.<sup>9</sup> Those who believed that survival in America required cooperation and cohesion feared that these religious schisms sowed dangerous discord and distrust. Tou Ger Xiong, a community activist in the Twin Cities, yearned for the days “before ‘religion’ became an issue,” as he put it in an interview with the *Twin Cities Reader*. “Now, in America, because of rigid religious institutions, we’re focusing our energy on difference instead of focusing on what makes us strong,” he said.<sup>10</sup> In the eyes of some observers, religious divisions had consequences that reached far beyond how to handle a family funeral or wedding ceremony. As Wameng Yang, a Hmong Christian and social services caseworker, described it in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, these religious changes posed an existential crisis. “The Hmong are concerned that if we don’t keep our traditional way, we will not trust each other,” he said. “If that is gone, there is no more Hmong.”<sup>11</sup>

How is it that “‘religion’ became an issue”? What caused Hmong refugees to experience such profound religious changes, and what did it mean for Hmong people to become Christian and follow “the new way”? As a historian with interests in both religion and immigration, I focus on American refugee resettlement policies and their religious impacts—in particular, how they facilitated Hmong people’s adoption of Christianity at the same time they disrupted the practice of traditional Hmong rituals. This book tells the story of how the refugee policies of the US government unwittingly transformed the religious lives of Hmong people, despite the fact that the resettlement program appeared to affirm religious diversity and was administered by people who cherished commitments to religious freedom and pluralism. Put simply, this is a story about how the policies of refugee resettlement produced profound religious unsettlement.

I argue that American refugee resettlement policies changed Hmong religious life in two major ways. First, they deprived Hmong refugees of the human and material resources necessary for conducting their traditional rituals. Because American policies prioritized younger Hmong for admission, Hmong refugees were resettled in the United States without the elder traditional ritual experts, who were left behind in refugee camps in Asia. Moreover, because they

were geographically dispersed across the country, Hmong refugees were separated from their kin and ethnic community, who were needed to conduct ceremonies.

At the same time, the administrative arrangements of refugee assistance facilitated the decision by many Hmong refugees to adopt Christianity. At the federal, state, and local levels, governments relied heavily on religious agencies and churches to provide essential resettlement services. This public-private, church-state system meant that Christian voluntary agencies and congregations were often the first point of contact for Hmong refugees looking for food, jobs, and housing. Because governments delegated much of the work of resettlement to Christian organizations, the refugee resettlement program produced close and dependent relationships between Christian resettlement workers and non-Christian Hmong refugees. The resettlement program thus helped introduce new religious alternatives to Hmong refugees while at the same time it rendered traditional religious options unviable.

Refugee resettlement policy set these religious changes in motion despite efforts by governments and voluntary agencies to make refugee assistance a religiously pluralistic enterprise. The people who envisioned and administered the resettlement program publicly championed ideals of pluralism and celebrated their commitment to serving refugees across boundaries of creed and culture. The pluralist intentions of the agencies and individuals who worked with refugees were often sincere. However, the ramifications of resettlement policies tell a different, more complicated story, and the religious changes experienced by Hmong refugees expose the difficulty of putting ideals of religious pluralism into practice. Even if governments and churches committed to respecting religious differences and protecting religious freedoms, an ambiguous definition of “religion” made these goals elusive. Uncertainty about what constituted religious activity in Christian resettlement work meant that religion was difficult to delimit and control. At the same time, uncertainty about whether Hmong beliefs and practices constituted a religion made Hmong traditions difficult to accommodate and protect.

The changes in Hmong religious life across the past five decades reveal not only the impact of American refugee resettlement policies but also the religious agency and innovation of Hmong people, who were highly responsive to changes in circumstances and often

willing to adopt new practices or adjust old ways in order to ensure their spiritual security. While government policies helped introduce Hmong people to Christianity, Hmong people adopted Christianity on their own terms, and conversion was not binary. Many Hmong people continued to follow traditional Hmong rituals at the same time they practiced Christianity, or they switched back and forth between the two over their lifetimes. Significantly, the religious logic behind Hmong people's decision to become Christian reveals the endurance of their traditional cosmology and religious framework: Christianity, they believed, offered access to rituals and religious entities that facilitated harmonious relations with the spirit world. Put another way, for many refugees, conversion to Christianity allowed them to acquire new ways of managing old spiritual problems.

Furthermore, as Hmong refugees adapted to life in the United States, so, too, did they adapt their Hmong traditions to an American setting. Over time, they transformed Hmong beliefs, practices, institutional forms, and even language to align with American laws and customs and Protestant ideas of what constitutes a religion. Throughout this process, Hmong Americans have chosen to both claim and disclaim religion: they have at times categorized their traditions as religion, and other times as culture, and sometimes as both. Finding opportunity in the unsettled status of their native beliefs and practices, Hmong Americans have found ways to sustain their traditions and secure rights and respect in ways that reveal spiritual creativity and resilience.

To tell the story of the religious impact of refugee resettlement, I focus on Minneapolis and Saint Paul, the unofficial "Hmong Capital of the U.S."<sup>12</sup> It is a distinction the Twin Cities area was not supposed to have. When planning Southeast Asian refugee resettlement in the 1970s, officials from the US government and the voluntary agencies (also known as "volags") wanted to prevent the formation of ethnic enclaves. For this reason, they intentionally dispersed Hmong refugees across the country. To some degree the plan worked, and by 1983 Hmong Americans lived in seventy-two communities in thirty states. Nonetheless, some areas of the United States developed significant Hmong populations. California, in particular, emerged as the state with the largest number of Hmong residents, who lived primarily in the Central Valley. But it was Minneapolis and Saint Paul that emerged as the urban center with the

## Metropolitan Areas with the Largest Hmong Populations in the United States in 1983

<i>Metropolitan Area</i>	<i>Number of Hmong Residents</i>
Minneapolis/Saint Paul, MN	8,730
Fresno, CA	8,000
Merced, CA	4,500
Stockton, CA	4,000
Orange County, CA	3,000
San Diego, CA	3,000
Sacramento, CA	2,500
Providence, RI	2,300
Denver, CO	1,500–2,000
Los Angeles, CA	1,500

*Source:* Hmong Resettlement Study.

largest population of Hmong people. By 1983, the Twin Cities was home to 8,730 Hmong Americans (see the table above).<sup>13</sup>

The rapid growth of the Twin Cities Hmong population owed to several circumstances. First, Minnesota was a significant site of primary resettlement due to energetic sponsorship and resettlement efforts. Voluntary agencies and local churches began to resettle Southeast Asian refugees as early as 1975 and started to sponsor Hmong refugees in large number after 1978. Over time, the Hmong refugees who had been resettled by the voluntary agencies and churches began to sponsor their relatives, who further expanded the Hmong population in the area. Significant secondary migration also contributed to the dramatic growth of the Twin Cities Hmong community. By the early 1980s approximately 40 percent of the Twin Cities Hmong population had relocated to Minnesota from over two dozen states. Most of these secondary migrants had left their sites of initial resettlement and moved to the Twin Cities in order to reunite with family, an essential source of economic, social, and ritual support. In addition, Minnesota drew secondary migrants because Hmong refugees spread word of the state's generous cash assistance programs and educational opportunities. "Among the early arrivals were some influential group leaders," wrote the authors of a 1984 government study about Hmong refugees in the Twin Cities. "They were treated with kindness and felt that Minnesota was a good place to be. They began persuading their relatives to come to Minnesota.

As more Hmong arrived in the state, Minnesota developed a reputation for being a good place to live.”<sup>14</sup>

If Minnesota has been prominent in Hmong America, Hmong Americans have also been prominent in Minnesota. Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodian refugees were also resettled in Minnesota, and by 1980, between 12,000 and 14,000 Southeast Asian refugees called Minnesota home. But Hmong refugees were the largest Southeast Asian refugee group in the state, with the majority living in Saint Paul and Minneapolis.<sup>15</sup> The Twin Cities area was thus a unique resettlement site: whereas other sites of significant Southeast Asian resettlement tended to have multiethnic populations, as in California, the Hmong were the dominant Southeast Asian refugee group in the Twin Cities from 1979 onward.<sup>16</sup>



In this book, I make connections between the religious lives of Hmong refugees and the American refugee resettlement system, which produced complicated encounters between institutions and individuals with different beliefs, objectives, and experiences. To treat these complex issues with nuance and compassion, I draw on a wide array of sources that reflect different perspectives, including the archival records of national, state, and local governments; national voluntary agencies and their local affiliates; church-based charities and individual congregations; and Hmong mutual aid associations and refugee-serving community organizations. Finally, I make use of oral history interviews with Hmong individuals, resettlement workers, religious leaders, and government officials. Oral history is valuable for religion scholars seeking to understand how people participate in and navigate unseen spiritual worlds.<sup>17</sup> Crucially, oral history centers the stories and perspectives of Hmong people and treats them “as authors and experts,” as advocated by Hmong studies scholars Yang Sao Xiong, Nengher Vang, and Chia Youyee Vang.<sup>18</sup>

I focus on “lived religion,” which considers what religious people *do*, not simply what they believe.<sup>19</sup> This book continues the work of scholars who have begun to study how Southeast Asian refugees have experienced the sacred in everyday life.<sup>20</sup> A focus on lived religion offers the further advantage of understanding how Christian volunteers embraced refugee resettlement as a ministry and a



mission and an opportunity to express deeply held religion convictions through acts of service.<sup>21</sup> Most important, a lived religion approach is essential to understanding Hmong traditions, which have long centered on ritual practice. “When 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,” argued the anthropologist Vincent Her. “What’s more, they accept these to be widely variable, different from region to region, community to community, and clan to clan.”<sup>22</sup> Considering the rich array of ritual practices Hmong people have pursued at different times and in different places is central to understanding Hmong spiritual and religious life.

Hmong resettlement is a useful focus case for broader questions about religion, migration, and government in the United States, in part because Hmong experiences were representative of larger developments. The voluntary agencies that resettled the Hmong remain prominent in the work of refugee relief and resettlement.<sup>23</sup> Hmong resettlement also occurred at a pivotal moment, as refugee populations were changing and as the predominantly Christian voluntary agencies were adjusting to new religious diversity, new norms of pluralism, and new legal and political developments that reordered the relationship between church and state. Hmong resettlement tested the capability of Christian organizations to operate pluralistically and informed how these institutions handled subsequent Asian and African migrants who arrived in the 1980s and 1990s.

To be sure, the story of Hmong refugee resettlement and religious change is in many ways unique. Like other refugees, the Hmong had special challenges that complicated their adjustment to American life. They arrived traumatized by years of war, violence, and forced migration. Many struggled with injuries and both physical and mental health problems. Most had limited formal education and knowledge of the English language. Finally, those who arrived in the first years of resettlement had no previously established ethnic community to welcome them and ease the transition to life in the United States. Importantly, the difficulties of adjustment were not limited to economic, social, and political matters but also the spiritual and religious. Hmong ritual practices and spiritual beliefs, particularly those related to health, were difficult for many Americans

to comprehend and to categorize. The fact that Hmong traditions do not conform to Christian-centric expectations of what constitutes a religion complicated the encounter between the Hmong refugees and their Christian sponsors.

But it is precisely because of Hmong people's uniqueness that their experiences offer an illuminating opportunity to explore the religious dimensions of refugee resettlement in an increasingly multireligious society. Suffering acute social and economic dislocation, Hmong refugees relied heavily on voluntary agencies and churches, while still pursuing rituals and beliefs that were often incomprehensibly foreign to the Christians who resettled them. As a case of extreme difference and dependency, Hmong refugee resettlement renders in sharp relief the consequences of using religious institutions to implement the refugee program, and it raises questions about the capacity of American individuals and institutions to accommodate religious difference. Even if individuals make genuine efforts to put pluralistic ideals into practice, the refugee resettlement system might still produce pressures for religious conformity, particularly on those who receive help, but also on those who give it.

Ultimately, studying the impact of refugee resettlement policy on Hmong religious life reveals the complex convergence of two tensions characterizing American religion and governance: first, the United States is both remarkably multireligious and deeply Christian; second, church and state are intertwined despite an expressed 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. The stories shared by Hmong refugees show us the power the state exerts on the spiritual lives of everyday people.

### *Refugee Resettlement as Church-State Governance*

Although this book centers on the experiences of Hmong refugees in the United States, the story of how resettlement policies changed the course of their religious lives offers insights into several larger issues about religion, migration, and government in America. The

first of these issues is the significance of Christian institutions in government efforts to aid refugees at home and abroad and the possibilities and perils that arise when government relies on faith-based voluntary agencies, church-based charities, and local congregations.

In the United States, refugee relief and resettlement are but one example of the many ways the government expands its capacity through partnerships with private institutions. The historian William Novak termed this phenomenon “public-private governance”; legal scholars Martha Minow and Jody Freeman called it “government by contract.”<sup>24</sup> The overlap of public and private institutions is perhaps the most distinctive feature of American government, to the point that scholars have described the United States as an “associational state,” a “subsidiarist state,” and a “Rube Goldberg State.”<sup>25</sup> This last term is particularly evocative in its representation of the complexity of the cooperation between public and private entities. The complicated connections between a dizzying number of institutions can make the entire system seem like a confusing contraption.

In these public-private collaborations, religious institutions have played an important role in efforts to care for vulnerable populations in both domestic and international contexts. Social service provision within the United States has long involved a mixed economy of government and private institutions, many of which have been religious.<sup>26</sup> Though government social welfare programs expanded and coincided with a reduction in the involvement of voluntary agencies in the 1930s, the role of private organizations generally increased throughout the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup> Government and religious organizations have also worked together to alleviate suffering around the globe. From feeding the hungry to caring for orphaned children, religious agencies have played a central role in international relief efforts, especially during moments of humanitarian crisis.<sup>28</sup> Although the United States does not have an official state church, the centrality of Christian institutions in many aspects of public life, from schooling to health care, amount to what the religion scholar Peter Beyer has described as a “shadow establishment,” a phenomenon common in British settler countries.<sup>29</sup>

The organizations that have been most prominent in refugee relief and resettlement have been not only private but also religious.<sup>30</sup> At the peak of the Southeast Asian refugee crisis in the early 1980s,

religious voluntary agencies—and especially Christian agencies—were responsible for resettling the majority of the Hmong, Lao, Vietnamese, and Cambodian refugees who migrated to the United States.<sup>31</sup> 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 organizations characterize refugee resettlement not only nationally but also locally. Across the country, state and local governments have collaborated with voluntary agencies and borrowed capacity by relying on congregations to serve as sponsors who aid refugees during the first weeks after arrival. Particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, when Southeast Asian refugees arrived in great numbers, congregational sponsorship was the resettlement model of choice.<sup>32</sup>

The scholarship on the conjoined relationship of church and state has grown in recent years, but we need a better understanding of how religious organizations have operated in the public-private, church-state system in the United States.<sup>33</sup> In particular, we need to know more about how these organizations have functioned not merely as private contractors of the government but as religious entities with distinctly religious beliefs, practices, organizational structures, and identities. At first glance, religious voluntary agencies appear to provide nonreligious services within the understood limits of the First Amendment. In reality, though, these organizations and the individuals who work in and with them often understand and carry out their work as distinctly religious in nature. By looking at refugee resettlement not simply from the vantage point of the government but also from the perspective of the people who provided and received resettlement services, we can better discern the unrecognized religious character of these organizations and their work. More broadly, we can gain a clearer view of what is at stake when government and religion overlap—especially in seemingly secular contexts, such as refugee resettlement, that appear to have nothing to do with religion at all.<sup>34</sup>

In addition, we need a deeper understanding of the religious repercussions of this entanglement of church and state. The sociologist Robert Wuthnow, in his historical account of the influence of government policies on American churches, likened his work to an environmental impact study. That approach is similarly useful in

efforts to understand the religious consequences of the partnerships between government and religious institutions. When government delegates public work to private religious organizations, how does this arrangement shape people's religious beliefs, practices, and identities? In particular, what is the impact experienced by religious minorities? Much of the debate about providing public funding for religious organizations has focused on evangelicals, a reflection of the contemporary fascination with conservative political movements and controversial policy developments such as Charitable Choice and the creation of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.<sup>35</sup> However, Catholics, mainline Protestants, and Jews all worked with government well before evangelicals did, though they have received less scholarly attention.<sup>36</sup> There is even less knowledge about how other religious groups—Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, adherents of indigenous traditions—have experienced these partnerships.

The case of Hmong refugee resettlement brings all these issues together. I show how expanding public capacity through contracts with Christian organizations is a well-established strategy of governance in the United States. In Southeast Asian refugee resettlement, governments at the federal, state, and local levels depended on religious institutions to administer government programs and provide important social services. Put simply, religious organizations, including congregations, undertook the resettlement work for which government did not have adequate resources on its own. However, as we shall see, this public-private, church-state system had important religious consequences, especially for the non-Christian refugees who were on the receiving end of humanitarian aid and social services.

### *The Challenge of Religious Pluralism*

This story of Hmong refugee resettlement and religious change matters for a second reason: it takes place during the last three decades of the twentieth century, a moment when the United States as a whole was undergoing significant religious change. During this period, Americans needed to adapt not only to the reality of an increasingly multireligious society but also to the prescriptive ideal of

religious pluralism, which aims to manage this new religious diversity.<sup>37</sup> As Pamela Klassen and Courtney Bender defined it, religious pluralism is the “commitment to recognize and understand others across perceived or claimed lines of religious difference.”<sup>38</sup> Pluralism is often connected to the goal of fostering peaceable relations between people who are religiously different because, as one refugee resettlement agency put it, showing respect to others “as human beings means respecting their beliefs as well.”<sup>39</sup> Gaining currency in the United States throughout the twentieth century, the ideal of religious pluralism challenged Americans to learn more about their new religious neighbors and to strive to live harmoniously with them. However, as the case of Hmong refugee resettlement shows, these aspirations were sometimes difficult to put into practice.

Religious pluralism has had a significant impact on many areas of American public life, including refugee resettlement work. Historically, the religious voluntary agencies that administered refugee resettlement were either Christian or Jewish and were primarily responsible for resettling their own people—fellow Lutherans, Jews, and Catholics, for example. However, these circumstances changed in the 1970s, when the religious voluntary agencies faced the unprecedented task of resettling thousands of refugees who identified as Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and other faiths.<sup>40</sup> If the clientele of the resettlement agencies was changing, so too was the legal, political, and cultural terrain on which they operated. At the same time that the United States was becoming more multireligious, consequential Supreme Court decisions reconfigured the relationship between church and state and expanded the range of religious people who could benefit from the constitutional promise of religious freedom.<sup>41</sup>

I address two issues raised by these changing circumstances. First, I consider how Christian voluntary agencies in the 1970s and 1980s adapted to this new religious pluralism while also negotiating their dual roles as church charities and extensions of the state. Second, I assess the degree to which they were successful in accommodating religious difference, especially in their work with non-Christian groups. Attention to Hmong resettlement helps to inform these issues. Non-Christian groups comprise not only a growing share of the American population but also a growing share of the population that receives and provides social services. However, most of the

religious freedom debate about contracting out government work to religious organizations has centered on the freedoms and needs of Christian service providers, not the freedoms and needs of Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and other non-Christian service recipients. This book remedies that oversight; while it considers the experiences of Christian service providers, it focuses on the issue of religious pluralism and freedom from the other end, bringing into the conversation the minority voices that have unfortunately received less consideration. At the center of this story are the Hmong, who experienced this church-state system of refugee assistance most directly, who felt the religious impacts of government resettlement policies most acutely, and who were the most spiritually and religiously vulnerable of all. In other words, at the center of this story are the people whose perspective matters most in assessing well-intentioned efforts to realize aspirations of religious pluralism and religious freedom.

The story of Hmong religious change demonstrates that new religious diversity posed important challenges to the public-private system of refugee resettlement. As Hmong experiences illustrate, the government's reliance on religious organizations to do the on-the-ground work of aiding refugees sometimes put people—particularly non-Christian people—in uncomfortable, and even coercive, situations. Some research suggests that by the start of the twenty-first century, religious resettlement agencies provided resettlement services in ways that were no different from their nonreligious counterparts.<sup>42</sup> But this book, by focusing on the early period of the 1970s and 1980s, offers a glimpse at how these organizations first attempted to understand and accommodate religious difference, which was important because refugee populations that arrived in subsequent decades would only become more racially, culturally, and religiously diverse.

I show that religious pluralism, as a prescriptive ideology, was—and continues to be—difficult to translate into action. Extolling American principles of religious freedom, government officials, private resettlement agencies, and lay volunteers often 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 obliga-

tion, 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 encounters for which they were unprepared. Practicing religious pluralism in their refugee work was, like other aspects of resettlement, characterized by uncertainty, improvisation, experimentation, and sometimes error. Though focused on the specific experiences of a relatively small ethnic group, this book tells a much bigger—and deeply humbling—story about the politics and practices of religious pluralism and the difficulty of fulfilling the promise of religious freedom in modern America.

### *Religious Conversion and Spiritual Migration*

Like the members of the Hmong Christian Church of God in Minneapolis, Hmong people have often spoken of their trans-Pacific crossing in relation to religious and spiritual crossing. These conversion narratives, so enmeshed in their experience of exodus, call attention to the intertwining of religion and migration. The case of Hmong refugees and religious change reveals two ideas: first, a religious experience can be understood as a form of migration; second, migration can be understood as a religious experience, with outwardly nonreligious migration policies nonetheless producing profound religious transformations.

Religion has long been recognized as vital to migrants as they undertake the challenge of creating new homes in new countries. Providing what Jewish studies scholar Shari Rabin described as a “mobile assemblage of resources for living,” religion helps migrants to survive, offering them an array of critical forms of support.<sup>43</sup> Religion fosters connections to home but also creates a space where migrants create new American versions of themselves and participate in American civic life.<sup>44</sup> And while religion provides a sense of stability, it is anything but static. Like migrants themselves, religious beliefs, practices, and institutions change over time as they are adapted to new settings.<sup>45</sup> Scholars have even gone so far to use religion and migration as interpretive lenses for each other. The historian Robert Orsi wrote that migration is “a spiritual event,” one in which “the outward journeying was matched by a changing inner



terrain.”<sup>46</sup> On the flip side, the religion scholar Thomas Tweed analyzed religion through the metaphor of migration and argued that religion is fundamentally defined by the experience of “crossing and dwelling.”<sup>47</sup>

Building on these ideas, this book illuminates the importance of religion in the lives of one particular group of migrants: refugees. Social scientists have written about many aspects of Southeast Asian refugees’ adjustment to American life, from employment and language acquisition to health and political engagement.<sup>48</sup> The development of the field of critical refugee studies has introduced new themes, calling attention to how empire, nation, and race have shaped not only refugee policies but also the cultural and political construction of the idea of the refugee.<sup>49</sup> But amid this scholarly literature, the importance of religion in the lives of refugees has received comparatively less attention. That religion is so often overlooked is not surprising. As we shall see, both government and voluntary agencies in charge of Southeast Asian refugee resettlement focused their attention on immediate concerns of housing, employment, and language. But Hmong refugees also had religious and spiritual needs, and they often turned to cherished rituals and beliefs when war, forced migration, and resettlement threw their lives into disarray. These traditions offered Hmong refugees a set of spiritual resources that enabled their survival in the present, connection to the past, and hope for the future. Centering religion in refugee stories changes not only how we view refugee migrations but also how we understand refugees themselves. “Acknowledging the spiritual dimension of Hmong refugee forced migrations frames the refugee as never really lost but always capable of returning to those who call upon the refugee’s spirit and remind it to dwell in the present,” argued the critical refugee scholar Ma Vang.<sup>50</sup>

The experiences of Hmong refugees also illuminate the importance of migration in the lives of religious people, whose beliefs and practices were shaped by state migration policies. Hmong refugee resettlement—both Hmong people’s experience of refugee migration and the government policies that directed it—initiated important changes in belief, ritual, identity, and community. Historians of American immigration have long been attentive to the significance of religion in shaping public beliefs and attitudes about migration, though they have rarely considered how the laws and policies that

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