

# The Role of Religion in the Cambodian Immigrant Experience

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## Abstract

The reputation of the United States as a destination for immigrants from around the world inspires conflicting images of this nation as the great “melting pot” of cultures and as a land of cultural distinction and diversity. For some, immigrating to the U.S. means simply relocating their culture to another country, while for others, arrival in the United States signals the beginning of a process of assimilation and acculturation. To further explore this dichotomy, this research investigates the experience of Cambodian immigrants in terms of one particular aspect of their culture—religion. While theorists often contend that the connection between religion and ethnicity is inherently stronger in an immigrant population, the diverse religious interpretations of Cambodian immigrants provide evidence to complicate that claim.

## The Community

Over the past twenty-five years, a Cambodian immigrant community of over 8,000 people has quietly established itself in the Twin Cities area. This population is almost exclusively composed of refugees who fled Cambodia in the years during and immediately following the Khmer Rouge regime. This research specifically deals with the religious experiences of nine Cambodian immigrants: four college students, three people in their twenties, and two older adults. To begin to understand any aspect of the experience of Cambodian immigrants in the United States, it is first imperative to be aware of their cultural base and the tragic circumstances that brought them so suddenly to this country.

Following a century of French colonialism and five years of civil war, the Khmer Rouge took control of Cambodia on April 17, 1975 with promises of peace, sovereignty, and prosperity for this war-weary nation. At first, the people of Cambodia welcomed their new government with open arms. In line with the ideology of other Communist governments, the Khmer Rouge’s goal was to “force a social, cultural, and economic revolution, without any Western technology or aid, that would create a racially pure Khmer society that was self-sufficient and socially and economically egalitarian” (Welaratna 1993:

94). Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge closed Cambodia to the outside world to fend off foreign influences and outside witnesses. Hidden from critical view, the Communist regime began to violently enforce the total restructuring of Cambodian society: “There was no transition period; hundreds of thousands of people... store clerks, factory workers, taxi drivers, cooks...suddenly became farmers...Thousands were executed immediately. Overnight, Cambodia became a nation of slaves” (www.mekong.net).

The atrocities of the Khmer Rouge period are clear in the shocking number of innocent lives lost or destroyed. Yet, the inhuman deeds of the Khmer Rouge do not end there—they live on, embedded in the collective memory of all Cambodians who survived this terrible time, many of whom sought refuge in United States and France. The brochure for the United Cambodian Association of Minnesota emphasizes the continuing role of this horrific experience in the lives of Cambodians, “From 1975 to 1978 two million Cambodian perished during a brutal holocaust perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge regime. Few escaped those years of horror and oppression. Broken families and broken lives are a central legacy of the Cambodian people’s tragic past” (see Appendix B). Though the extreme suffering the Cambodian people experienced at the hands of the Khmer Rouge is a significant element of the Cambodian immigrant experience, it does not overwhelm the Khmer culture that remains at the foundation of Cambodian identity.

Khmer culture, shared by the vast majority of people of Cambodian heritage, has been shaped by the ideas of Theravada Buddhism and Indian Brahmanism. From Brahmanism, the Khmer adopted a common system of social hierarchy based upon one’s determined role within society. The “social pyramid” of the Khmer can be characterized as having three functional groups: the sdech category or royalty and aristocracy; the neamoeun montrey or the professionals and bureaucrats, and the reastr or rural common people (Peang-Meth 1991: 445). This caste-like system reflected the traditional occupations of the populace, which were determined by birth.

Superimposed on this Brahmanistic social system were Buddhist values of equality and social responsibility, which eased rigidity of the hierarchical social structure with a sense of compassion. Other qualities emphasized as “good characteristics” in the Buddhist tradition are very prevalent in the Khmer culture, such as “generosity and selfless concern for others, warmth and a good-natured temperament, abhorrence of fighting, drinking, fornication, and other sins, devotion to the family, industriousness, religious devotion, cooperation with others, and honesty”(Welaratna 1993: 29). These qualities are felt to be desirable within Khmer culture as indicators of living in the Buddhist way, along the Eightfold Path to enlightenment and freedom from rebirth. The bulk of Cambodian customs, traditions, language, worldview and other cultural

elements draw upon this amalgamated foundation of Buddhist and Brahmanistic philosophies.

The Cambodian immigrants of Minnesota, the community of interest for the purposes of this research, claim a truly distinctive history and unique culture. To appreciate the meaning of this research, this refugee community's ancient Khmer culture and the remembered tragedy of the Khmer Rouge revolution must not be neglected as fundamental elements of their experiential reality.

### The Problem

In considering the religious interpretations of a specific refugee population, such as that of Cambodian immigrants, it is helpful to find the meaning of religion as a theoretical conception, and then in terms of its role within immigrant experience. Theoretical perspectives often stem from Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, which defines religion as a system of beliefs "common to a determined group; they are something belonging to the group, and they make its unity" (2001: 13). Religion, then, can be viewed as both a cause in the formation of social groups as well as a source of a group's perpetual social stability. In other words, the unity of faith naturally extends to the unity of society.

Whereas Durkheim parallels religion and society, Clifford Geertz conceives of religion as culture, defining each as a "system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (2001: 16). This definition implies that any religion is a specific set of external sources of information, which provide a certain sense of meaning, explanation, and collective comfort to its faithful in a world that would otherwise be senseless and troubling.

The sociology of religion and ethnicity extends these classic theoretical perspectives by incorporating additional points to consider such as the maintenance of culture, language, values, traditions, etc. Though much of contemporary theory focuses more on the religious interpretations of ethnicity rather than the particular role the immigrant experience plays in religious interpretation, it is a helpful starting point. In the essay, "Introduction to Race, Ethnicity, and Religion", Michael Emerson describes his conception of the connection between religion and ethnic identity, Religion creates and recreates racial/ethnic identity, as it becomes part of how different groups define themselves. As people interact in their largely homogenous religious institutions and social networks, they continually define and shape their worlds, but they do so differently from other groups, because

they do so within the context of racially/ethnically separate networks. Thus, the relationship between religion and racial/ethnic identity is dynamic. Each reinforces the other, but also changes the other over time. (2001: 81)

From this perspective, the creation of social groups based upon a shared system of symbols and beliefs most often occurs along racial/ethnic lines because “people choose to worship with others like themselves, where meaning and belonging are more easily created and more individually satisfying”(2001: 81). Religion, then, should be relied upon as a significant aspect of ethnicity—although Emerson admits that this relationship may change over time. One possible generator of change within this definition would be additionally considering the distinctions of the immigrant within the religion/ethnicity combination.

Transplanting a vital ethnicity-religion relationship into a foreign country sets the stage for an entirely new subject of consideration—immigrant religion, which is the subject at the basis of this paper. While there has been much academic consideration given to religion and ethnicity, as well as to the immigrant experience in general, the complexities of immigrant religion do not often get full attention. A small body of work has been done on the subject, however, and a predominant theme about the nature of immigrant religion has arisen from these findings—“Immigrant religious institutions provide the physical and social spaces in which those who share the same traditions, customs, and languages can reproduce many aspects of their native cultures for themselves and attempt to pass them on to their children”(Ebaugh et al 2000: 385).

It is true that the diversification of new immigration trends to the United States can be witnessed while driving through any large city and finding architecturally authentic mosques, temples, gurdwaras, synagogues, and other religious centers in areas where only churches once stood. In *Religion and the New Immigrants* Ebaugh and Chafetz argue that the physical reproduction of home-country religious institutions is only one of the major ways immigrant congregations reproduce ethnicity, the other ways being, “incorporating ethnic practices and holidays into formal religious ceremonies, through domestic religious practices, and through congregationally related social activities”(2000: 385). When immigrants attend services, festivals, or gatherings at their religious community center they have an opportunity to stop being “the other” as an immigrant and simply be themselves as members of their ethnic group—familiar people, language, food, smells, sounds, and ceremonies imitate the home-country environment and create a most comfortable atmosphere of cultural homogeneity.

In the essay “Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States”, Min Zhou and Carl L. Bankston explore the idea of ethnicity reproduction by examining the religious participation of Vietnamese immigrants along with trends of ethnic self-description and commitment to endogamy. In this survey, the Vietnamese religious institutions are Buddhist temples and Catholic churches and the sample is made up of Vietnamese high school students. Among these teenagers, 43 percent attended church or temple more than once a week and were more likely to describe themselves as “Vietnamese” than infrequent church or temple participants, who were more likely to call themselves “American.” Additionally, of these frequent church/temple-goers, 70 percent reported that all of their friends were Vietnamese and 66 percent say they’ll prefer to marry a Vietnamese spouse (2001: 105). This case study supports the idea of immigrant religious institutions as centers of ethnicity reproduction, as it appears that students who are intensely involved in religion, whether it be traditional Buddhism or Catholicism, are more likely to conceive of themselves and their world from an ethnically Vietnamese perspective. One interesting point of consideration demonstrated in this study is the research’s lack of distinction between the traditional Vietnamese Buddhism and French inspired Catholicism. Is an immigrant’s intense involvement in traditional religious practices more effective in reproducing ethnicity?

There is little doubt that immigrant religious institutions do foster a collective sense of ethnic solidarity, yet questions arise concerning the strength of religion’s influence in the pressures of the fast-paced society of an increasingly secularized America. Steven Vertovec, of the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Oxford University, writes of the patterns of change that arise in immigrant religion in “Religion and Diaspora”. The demands of migration and minority status add new dimensions to the importance of religion. For example, a religious institution, as a base of faith and ethnicity, may then serve as the support center for social organization and movements establishing “campaigns for legal tolerance or cultural rights surrounding specific practices, freedom from discrimination, and access to public resources offered to other groups”(2000:14). The expansion of the function of a religious group is only one sign of the forces of change in effect upon immigrant religion.

In addition to the forces of social and generational change, Vertovec argues that the presence of ethnic and religious pluralism a country such as America, often “stimulates a mode of religious change through heightened self-awareness”(2000:16). In other words, in a society of increased religious diversity, an immigrant may be compelled to reevaluate and modify his or her own religious beliefs with a new found awareness of the wider world of other cultures, other religious systems, and other ways of life.

These factors, which may induce change in the interpretation of immigrant religion, are evident in their effects upon religious identity and community, ritual practices, “re-spatialization”, and the distinction between religion and culture. Vertovec describes the varied process of immigrant religious communities to form a new identity—a process ideological building, adapting, remodeling, and adopting efforts that produce entirely unique immigrant congregations as “worlds unto themselves”(2000:18). Immigrant religious communities may foster a sense of identity, yet this identity is not identical to that of religious practitioners in the home country. The pressures of immigration produce a separate religious identity that draws from these important immigrant experiences.

Religious rituals are also subject to change under the forces of immigration, which is manifested most often in the “streamlining” of religious practices in continuity with other elements of religious change. With a Hinduism-related example from the paper “Within and beyond the state: Ritual and the assertion of Tamil-Hindu identities in Malaysia”, Vertovec states “in most places, many rites have been popularized in order to appeal to young, diaspora-born Hindus even to the chagrin of conservative elders: in Malaysia, for instance, Hindu leaders have complained that the inclusion of India-produced music has wrought the ‘disco-ization’ of Hindu ritual!”(2000:19).

Yet another example of the effects of immigration on religious experience is described by as “re-spatialization” by Vertovec. Those geographic, social, cultural, and sacred spaces that were common in religious identity in the homeland are no longer available in the country of resettlement. Jonathan Z. Smith describes this phenomenon, “To the new immigrant in the diaspora, nostalgia for homeplace and cultic substitutes for the old, sacred center were central religious values...Diasporic religion, in contrast to native, locative religion, was utopian in the strictest sense of the word, a religion of ‘nowhere’, of transcendence”(qtd. in Vertovec 2000: 19). As the sense of religious identity and ritual practices have been modified under the circumstances of immigration, so, too, have ideas of sacred and secular spaces been transformed.

Finally, Vertovec explores the redefinition of the connection between religion and culture as another artifact of the immigrant religious experience. Perhaps because of the previously discussed patterns of religious change, there is an increasingly definite distinction between religion and culture. Within many ethnic religious groups, there is an undeniable union between that which is cultural and that which is religious—in the traditional homeland environment they are indistinguishable from one another. In the case of immigrant religion, however, the pressures of change sometimes result in the movement to separate the two entities, as a process of “dis-embedding a set of

beliefs and practices—a ‘religion’ from a ‘culture’ which would then be defined as ‘secular’”(Pocock qtd in Vertovec 2000: 20). In an environment that is increasingly religiously and ethnically diverse, the distinction between religion and culture is growing.

Clearly, the earlier stated theories on immigrant religion as the means to ethnicity reproduction are in conflict with Vertovec’s ideas on the patterns of religious change as effects of the immigrant experience. To some, ethnicity and religion are mutually supportive ideas whether the setting is the traditional religious homeland or the destination of immigrant resettlement. Yet, it seems that these theories fall short by not accounting for the influential role of the complete immigrant experience, which includes the group’s collective history, circumstances of migration, the traditional cultural and social systems, country of resettlement, the pressures of mainstream society, etc.

This research will examine the problem of the role of religion in terms of the Cambodian immigrant experience. I will seek to determine whether Cambodian immigrants interpret religion as a source of cultural reproduction or as an aspect of identity that may be distinct and separate from Cambodian culture.

## Methodology

Unknowingly, the research for this study began with a short participant observation experience during the fall of 2001, when I randomly stopped by the Cambodian Wat Munisotaram near Hampton. After spending time studying in Asia the previous year, the wat’s golden Buddha image surrounded by Minnesotan cornfields was a striking scene that drew me in. A friend and I knocked on the door of the big house and found several friendly Cambodian Buddhist monks, with whom we chatted as they finished cooking their fragrant lunch. At the time of this visit this research project was not conceived of, but this initial experience at the wat gave me a first glimpse of the distinctive Cambodian presence in Minnesota, and sparked my interest to know more.

The bulk of the research was completed through a series of personal interviews with various members of the Cambodian immigrant community. To begin to determine who the interview participants would be, I enlisted the help of Saroeun, a fellow Sociology/Anthropology major who, as a person of Cambodian heritage, has special knowledge on the subject. With her direction, I contacted three Cambodian students at St. Olaf by email. I visited the United Cambodian Association of Minnesota and contacted the Cambodian family friends of a St. Olaf student to determine the remaining interview participants.

The setting of the interviews depended on the participant—for example, all St. Olaf students were interviewed at the Cage, the UCAM staffers were

interviewed in a meeting room at the UCAM office, and the others were interviewed at their family home in Bloomington. For all of the cases but one, the interview was the first time I had met the participant, so I spent several minutes introducing myself and explaining this research endeavor. After obtaining informed consent, the interviews were conducted in a relaxed manner by allowing the conversation flow without enforcing too much structure. The interviews followed a general chronology of questions loosely described as follows: circumstances of immigration, experiences in Cambodia, religious path in the U.S., personal views on religion, comparative to family, future of their religious beliefs. The interview questions are included in full in Appendix A. Most of the interviews lasted for an hour to an hour and a half.

To supplement the interview research, I took part in three participant observation periods. I spent two hours at Wat Munisotaram on a Sunday afternoon with a few members of the St. Olaf Asian Awareness Association. During this visit, I was able to tour the temple grounds, meet some of the monks, see the sanctuary, and observe the ceremony in which a monk gives up his robes and becomes a layman once again. In addition, this observation experience gave me a real sense of the temple atmosphere—the smells of the food and the incense, the sounds of the monks' incantations, the traditional décor, and the subtle cultural rules that dictate the interactions between the monks and the lay people.

The second participant observation episode occurred at St. Olaf during Asia Weeks at the Cambodian Buddhist Water Blessing Ceremony. For an hour and a half, two monks chanted while Cambodian Buddhists visiting from the Twin Cities repeated these prayers. It was interesting to closely observe this formal Buddhist ceremony—the teaching structure of the ceremony allowed for the monks and the Cambodian Buddhists to share information about their religion and this blessing in particular.

Finally, I once more visited the Wat Munisotaram during the Lunar New Year celebration. I was able to wander around the temple grounds where hundreds of Cambodian Buddhists were celebrating at this very important event. This participant observation experience conveyed a sense of just how large the Cambodian Buddhist community in the area is, as well as offering some insight into the jovial tone and reunion-like atmosphere created at a temple's religious festivals.

The strengths of this research are found in its ethnographic nature, which allows both the researcher and the respondent room to pursue issues of special interest, clarify and alter the interview format, and personalize responses. The goals of this study can be best fulfilled with an ethnographic methodology that respects the extremely personalized subject of religious interpretation, which varies greatly depending on the individual.

This research has several weaknesses, mainly due to the limitations placed upon it by the project's short duration of only one semester, the lack of any kind of research budget, and a general time deficiency. For instance, if more time were available many other Cambodian immigrants of different ages could be found and interviewed, while if more money were available a translator could be paid to assist in interviewing the monks and other Cambodians who may not be fluent in English.

The generalizability of this study's findings is limited to Cambodian immigrants in the Minnesota area, who experience life as Cambodian immigrants in proximity to the Buddhist, Christian, and secular Cambodian institutions in this region. The participants of this study represent the Cambodian population of a unique setting: an upper Midwestern, mid-size metropolitan area with a Cambodian presence of over 8,000. Due to the distinctive experiences of different immigrant groups in different settings, it would be difficult to apply these particular findings to the broader case of immigrant religion as a whole. This study, however, may contribute to the more general discussion of the religious experiences of immigrants by revealing a small glimpse of the religious interpretations of Cambodians in a setting such as Minnesota.

## Findings

Throughout the individual interviews and the participant observation sessions, it became very clear that religion is a point of much consideration for many Cambodian immigrants. For each of the participants, his or her Cambodian heritage, immigrant experience, and religious interpretation coexist in a unique and complex relationship. For this reason, the thoughts and words of each respondent have an inherent meaningful value that is essential to consider for the purposes of this research. The various topics covered in the interviews shall be discussed with a detailed focus on the responses of several individuals, whose names have been changed to respect their anonymity.

To establish the presence of a coherent religious culture in pre-revolutionary Cambodia, the interview opened with inquiries into the religious heritage of the Khmer as well as any personal or handed-down memories of Cambodia. All of the respondents supported the idea of Cambodia as a deeply Buddhist country with an ancient culture steeped in traditional values of Buddhism. When asked about the importance of philosophical or religious traditions in Cambodia, Thavrak\* who immigrated to the U.S. in 1982 at 20 years of age responded, "Yes, the Cambodian cultural and some Buddhist religious traditions are important to my life, also my family's. They help me to be kind, gentle, respectful of all mankind, have patience, etc." Of those old enough to remember Cambodia, many recalled a slow-paced, rural lifestyle in a tropical

country, surrounded by family and friends.

For all respondents, thoughts about the Khmer Rouge regime were an obstacle to expressing complete memories of traditional Cambodian culture and religion. Aspara, now a mother of five living in Bloomington, immigrated to the States with her husband and young son in 1981. When first asked about Cambodian religion, she focused exclusively on the emptiness and despair brought by the Khmer Rouge who forced everyone to “just stop everything...no school, no Buddha—only farming”. Im, the UCAM Adult Basic Education Teacher and an immigrant in 1996 explained that the dictatorship of the Khmer Rouge exercised absolute control over the people, outlawing any religion and forcing people to “do it in your heart.”

Not only did the Khmer Rouge’s violent enforcement of Communism push Buddhism out of public culture, it also pushed some to reconsider their faith in a religious tradition that had allowed for such destruction to occur within its people. Mum, a college student born in a Thai refugee camp, tried to explain the experience of her parents during the Khmer Rouge, who have told her that during the Khmer Rouge Buddhists were killed for acting upon their beliefs in any way—even for simply burning incense. After seeing so many injustices in their own communities by people of their own culture, her twenty-something parents were caused to question their own beliefs. Of all the respondents, Mum was the only one to plainly suggest that her family’s traumatic experience in Cambodia with the Khmer Rouge could have caused a faltering of Buddhist faith. Mum also explained the difficulty of following the compassionate Buddhist way of life when your family was starving and anyone could be killed at any time, which is an idea that several of the other participants mentioned in the discussions.

It is unclear whether the violent pressures of the Khmer Rouge acted as any type of catalyst for the Christian conversion of the formerly Buddhist Cambodians. Most respondents appeared somewhat uncomfortable with probing questions about their personal interpretation of the Khmer Rouge, so these sensitive issues were avoided. But, from the interviews it is certain that seven of the nine respondents did convert to Christianity in some degree—with all but one of the conversions occurring in once settled in the United States. Sinok, a UCAM staff member in his late twenties, explained that his parents converted his family to Christianity in a Thai refugee camp after living as Buddhists for their entire lives prior to the communist revolution. Immediately after Sinok spoke of his family’s Catholic conversion, Im interrupted, speaking bitterly of the American and English missionaries whom he saw as taking advantage of naïve Cambodians at their time of greatest need. In the case of Sinok’s family, it could be hypothesized that the horrors of the Khmer Rouge and the charity of the refugee camp missionaries were both

prominent factors in their Christian conversion.

Another possible factor influencing Cambodian's religious interpretation may be found in the nature of the sponsorship each family relied upon in their immigration to the United States. Of the nine participants, only three received official sponsorship from Churches—these three, of course, were converted Christians. The others gained sponsorship from a variety of other, more personal, relationships: for instance, Thavrak was sponsored by the daughter of a doctor he'd met in a refugee camp, Im came to the U.S. with a student sponsorship, and Aspara and her son Bun Thab were sponsored by her brother's family who'd arrived a bit earlier.

Bopha, a college sophomore who was born in Iowa, described the sponsorship of her mom and dad's families by Lutheran churches. With the sponsorship, there was no contingency that the immigrants had to attend church, yet the church made itself attractive to the newly arrived immigrant families by offering them free English classes in the church basement. Bopha's grandmother began attending English classes there, and was soon bringing her entire family to Sunday church services. Bopha speculates that her grandmother was attracted to the Lutheran church because of its openness in accepting immigrant families and the strong sense of community she experienced there, in addition to a sense of duty she felt in needing to repay the church for its sponsorship of her family. Mum echoed this idea, saying that she felt her family became Christian not out of a religious inclination or an attempt to assimilate, but because of a feeling that "they [the church] helped us, we owe them something". She added, somewhat bitterly, that her mother believed that the benevolent church sponsors had sometimes skimmed some money from the family refugee stipend provided by the government. Still, their family remained faithfully within the church of their sponsorship while also resuming some traditional Buddhist practices as a connection to their culture.

As the course of the interview shifted from the past to the present, the respondents were asked to elaborate on their own religious interpretations at the present time. Their responses revealed four categories of religious perspectives amongst them—those who hold completely Christian beliefs, those who are thoroughly Buddhist in their interpretations, those who subscribe to the practices of both traditions, and those who are non-religious. It seems appropriate to first discuss the non-religious group, which is comprised only of Sinok. Sinok, the participant whose parents converted to Christianity in Thailand, has chosen to not be involved in the Catholicism of his upbringing or in the Buddhism of his cultural heritage. He participates in the main festivals and holidays of each faith out of a desire to please his family and feel part of the community. Even despite his religious disconnection, Sinok is very involved in the Cambodian community as a staff member at UCAM, where he

works to maintain culture in the younger generations of Cambodians. Sinok is an example of one who identifies much more deeply with the Cambodian culture than with any sort of religious tradition.

In contrast, of course, those respondents who defined themselves as wholly Christian conveyed a much greater sense of religious influence upon their lives. Thavy, a woman in her late-twenties who immigrated at age 13, described her constant connection with her religion and its influence on her. She attends all kinds of Christian events every weekend, saying “I feel in all of these events it is exciting to learn about God, about new things, or change my life completely.” Thavy is definitely intensely involved in her Christian faith. However, she is also intensely involved in her Cambodian culture as a staff member at UCAM. Of her relationship with the wider Cambodian community she is very positive, “I am very active in my community because I am proud to be who I am, plus I grew up with Cambodian society. I know how kids struggle like myself...I feel that it would be important to be a role model to the younger generation.”

Like Thavy, Thavrak is a Christian staff member at UCAM. He described how he chooses his Christian faith and goes to church every Sunday, but he continues to have value and respect for many of his Cambodian values, culture, and traditions. He uses Christianity as his guiding moral and spiritual philosophy, yet he is open to attending non-Christian events to learn new things. He finds his work at UCAM and his involvement in the Cambodian community important because, he says that he “first experienced the difficulty in adjusting to new ways of life and different culture, I like to work with and involve with my Cambodian people hoping that I can make some difference in their life.” Thavrak is another example of a Cambodian member of a non-Cambodian church who dedicates their spirituality to the Christian God and their life’s work to the Cambodian community. In the cases of Thavy and Thavrak, an intense commitment to non-traditional religious practices only heightens their dedication and connection to Cambodian community and culture.

On the other hand, Bopha, the third respondent to identify as completely Christian, does not enjoy the same relationship with the culture of the wider Cambodian immigrant community. When she was younger she remembers her grandmother, who had brought the family to Christianity, telling her to “choose one path”. In other words, at a young age Bopha was taught about the value of true dedication to a certain set of beliefs instead of being told of any ideas of religious pluralism, etc. She took this advice to heart, and has never attended any sort of traditional Cambodian Buddhist ceremony until the Blessing Ceremony this April at St. Olaf. She also spent most of her childhood years without any contact with the Cambodian immigrant community and resisted her

parents' attempts to teach her the Khmer language. As a college-aged young woman, Bopha is now experiencing feelings of regret concerning her lack of a Cambodian cultural understanding, saying she would like to visit Cambodia but first wants to learn more about her heritage so as not to be like "hollow bamboo"—looking like a Cambodian but not actually feeling like a Cambodian.

The group of participants that characterized their religious beliefs as being fully Buddhist demonstrated some experiences that contrasted those of the Christian Cambodians. Im, the UCAM staffer who arrived in the U.S. only six years ago as a student, has maintained his Buddhist traditions in Cambodia in the twenty years following the Khmer Rouge as well as in the U.S. since his arrival. Im is involved with the Cambodian community daily, through his work, yet he is not well connected to the Cambodian Buddhist community—he has not been to any Buddhist temple since he immigrated. Im made comments alluding to the fact that Buddhism is central to Cambodian culture and identity, saying, "Religion is part of the culture tree, if someone tells me they're Cambodian I think they are Buddhist." Im, as mentioned previously, is critical of Christian missionaries in Cambodia and seems to believe that denying Buddhism as a religious practice is like denying your Cambodian heritage. In American society, it is difficult to hold onto religion and culture—but Im contends that it is a most important effort to make.

Look Tha, a freshman college student born in the U.S also identified himself as a Cambodian Buddhist. While his parents were very proactive in having the family learn English and finding a comfortable place in American society, they also worked hard to maintain the family's Cambodian heritage. They achieved this by teaching the children the Khmer language, telling stories of Cambodia, visiting Cambodia and remaining relatives there as a family, attending the temple regularly, and adhering to traditional Buddhist philosophies. Look Tha's interview responses reveal a sense of cultural awareness and pride that has not been so prominent in other respondents. He appears to be a successful student, a well-liked peer, and a thoughtful Buddhist with a thoughtful appreciation of his roots: "I try to live as best as I can according to the Eight-fold paths to Nirvana. It's tough; just like living by any rule except people around you don't necessarily live the same way you do. I have to compromise sometimes so that I can fit into a Christian culture." Look Tha is an example of a young Cambodian who is successfully navigating the potentially confusing journey to reach to an understanding of the dynamic connections between religion, culture, and society.

The three participants who described themselves as being part of both the Christian and the Buddhist worlds demonstrate a greater sense of religious and cultural conflict than do other respondents. Aspara, mother of five, has

changed her religious practices at different times since her immigration. After her arrival in the U.S. twenty years ago as a disaffected Buddhist, she willingly began to attend church with her family's sponsor. She explained that she liked going to church because she felt a sense of instant community, although she never lessened her commitment to traditional Buddhism with visits to the Temple and ceremonies performed at home. She has raised her children in the Cambodian way, complete with language, food, values, and a mother's doting. Over the years, Aspara has developed a "One God" philosophy, which eases the conflict between Christianity and Buddhism in that both traditions are just different ways to connect to the one God. Her participation in religions is not widely approved of by either institution, as she explained that the church says the temple is bad while the temple says the church is bad. This sort of exclusivity causes Aspara to refrain from attending either one, and instead she practices her beliefs in her heart and home.

Aspara's son, Bun Thab, is a college student who appreciates his mother's quest for a personalized religious ideology and follows her lead. However, he feels that he understands the philosophies behind each religious tradition better than his mother does and can therefore make a more informed statement of belief. Still, Bun Thab is not certain of what he believes—although he is sure of the concepts of "One God" and the subsequent value of all religions. He'd like to have a traditional Asian wedding and says he will surely pass on Cambodian culture to his children, while he is also certain that his kids will be allowed to choose their own religious beliefs as he has.

Baptized at age six and a lifelong attendant of the Wat Munisotaram, Mum's religious perspective is an ongoing process that began during childhood. Mum's memories of church, Sunday school, and youth group reflect her church community's sensitivities to Buddhist beliefs within their congregation. Mum recalls that her pastor never made any statements about "one path" to heaven or the righteousness of Christianity—he made her family feel very welcome as Cambodian immigrants. From church, Mum began to understand God as a friend, while at the temple she saw God in the Chinese Buddha image. As a child, this was easy for her to accept. The older she becomes, however, the more she struggles to reconcile the conflicting philosophies of Christianity and Buddhism.

For instance, Mum does believe in reincarnation—she even has a sense of her birth in a Thai refugee camp as the reincarnation of a good friend of the family's. Of course, the doctrine of reincarnation does not agree with the Christian perception of an eternity in heaven after only one life. She constantly struggles to rectify the two perspectives in her mind, finally declaring, "we'll see what happens." Despite this conflict, Mum believes in the inherent value of all religious traditions, which offer similar valuable guiding principles of

morality, justice, and sacred reliance on the divine. Mum feels fortunate to have such full experiences in both the Christian and the Buddhist worlds, which have contributed to her complex identity as a Cambodian and an American.

### Summary/Conclusions

First, the findings of this study suggest that the religious perspective of Cambodian immigrants is a complicated subject that cannot easily be simplified or stereotyped. One generalization that can be made with total assurance, however, is that all of the participants demonstrated an impressive level of thoughtfulness in their approach to religion. For these nine Cambodian immigrants, religion is a philosophy of spirituality that should be challenged, adopted, and lived out.

This research revealed that, for Cambodian immigrants, religion is not necessarily perceived of as a means of cultural reproduction, in the way that Ebaugh and Chafetz conceived of it. While a few respondents illuminated the idea that being involved in Buddhism at the temple can be described as being involved in the Cambodian community, others who claimed Buddhism as their faith rarely attended any events with the wider religious population. Still, in a way, these privately practicing Buddhists were perpetuating Cambodian cultural traditions in their beliefs and actions of worship, even if these actions were not obviously contributing to a greater collective ethnic identity.

The responses of participants who defined themselves as Christians or as non-religious offered even more evidence to refute the idea that Cambodians perceive of religion as a method of cultural reproduction. These Cambodians were members of non-Cambodian churches or attended no religious institution at all, yet almost all had made it a priority to be involved in other meaningful ways to strengthen Cambodian community and culture. While it is true that immigrant groups find religion to be helpful in fostering ethnic and cultural identity, the diversity of Cambodian immigrants' religious interpretations causes this particular ethnic group to also rely upon other secular sources of cultural reproduction.

The findings do provide some evidence to support the theory of immigrant religion given by Vertovec, that is, the patterns of change surrounding immigrant religion eventually lead to a greater distinction between religion and culture. Though it is clear that Cambodian culture has an ancient foundation in Buddhist thought, the Cambodian Buddhist culture in the United States cannot completely escape the pressures of generational change, religious pluralism, mainstream American values, etc. For nearly all of the respondents, Cambodian heritage was an inherent presence in their personal identity, while each of them expressed some sense of freedom to conceive of their own religious perspectives. It seems that these Cambodian immigrants feel

naturally comfortable with the concept of culture and religion as separate aspects of identity. In terms of religion, Cambodian immigrants appear to agree to a sort of loosely guiding philosophy characterized as “to each his own”, with a full and constant awareness of their essential Cambodian heritage.

This study offers only a small glimpse into the complexities of immigrant religion, which varies greatly with each of the multitude of ethnic groups establishing themselves in greater numbers in the U.S. each year. The United States is only becoming more religiously diverse, and necessary efforts need to be made to understand the issues and the experiences characteristic of any immigrant group. This paper may be considered only the smallest of steps towards building a working knowledge of immigrant religion, in terms of its possible connection or disconnection from immigrant culture. Further research should seek to bolster the study of immigrant religion by focusing on each and every distinct ethnic group. In addition, to maximize the information gained, the studies should be performed with a deeper focus in mind—using more participants, longer interviews, translators, a wider geographic region, etc.

One of the fundamental elements of any stable and successful community is a real sense of self-awareness. For the United States to promote and support a healthy domestic society into the 21st Century it must seek to truly know itself, and in that endeavor it must genuinely understand its immigrants, in every way possible.

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### Interview: A Study of the Role of Religion in the Experience of Cambodian Immigrants in Minnesota

1. When did you and/or your family arrive in America? How old were you?
2. Do you recall anything from your time in Cambodia and the surrounding region? Do your parents or other family members have recollections they've shared with you?
3. When you think of Cambodia, what images come to mind? Do you think of Cambodia often?
4. In Cambodia, was Buddhism or any other philosophical or religious tradition an important part of you and your family's lives? How so?
5. Why did your family immigrate to the United States? Did any group or organization sponsor your immigration? What did this sponsorship entail?
6. Tell me about some of your initial impressions of the United States. Did you or your family experience any "culture shock"? How did you deal with

this?

7. Are you active in any Cambodian or Khmer community groups? Why do you feel this is or is not important?
8. From the time you and your family arrived in America until now, what has been your religious tradition of choice?
9. How often do you take part in religious events? What kind of events? How do you feel these events affect you?
10. Do you connect with religion on a daily basis? How do you do this?
11. Do you feel that religion is community based or more personally oriented?
12. Can you identify ways in which your religion influences your actions and attitudes toward the world?
13. Do you feel that your personal identity shaped by your religion? Is your personal identity shaped by your Cambodian heritage? In what ways?
14. How do your religious beliefs differ from those of other members of your family? Do younger family members interact with religion differently than older members of the family? If so, why? Does this difference cause any misunderstandings?
15. Living in the United States, do you feel any pressures to alter your religious or cultural ideals? Do you feel comfortable in a typical “American” atmosphere, such as that of St. Olaf?
16. Looking to the future, do you feel like your religious beliefs will change? Can you predict if religion will grow or decline in its importance to you?
17. If and when you were to have children, what religious beliefs would you want to impart to them?