

Received: 11 July 2026; **Revised:** 03 September 2026; **Accepted:** 23 September 2026; **Published:** 18 October 2026

Archs Sci. (2026) Volume 76(4), Pages 46-55, Paper ID 2026406.
<https://doi.org/10.68304/as/76406>

Religious Resources, Moral Community, and Social Change in Upland Vietnam: The Ta Phin Protestant Church in the Sa Pa Area

Nguyen Truong Giang

VNU University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam; truonggiang@vnu.edu.vn

Abstract This article examines how a local Protestant church has become a socially significant and consequential institution within a Hmong community in northern Vietnam. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork undertaken by the author in Ta Phin, including participant observation in congregational life, attendance at Sunday worship, more than ten in-depth interviews with members of the community, and sustained engagement with two key interlocutors—Pastor Chang A Cang and Ms. Ly Thi May—the article approaches the church not simply as a community of religious faith, but also as an intermediary social institution. It argues that the Ta Phin Protestant Church translates faith into social capital, moral authority into everyday discipline, and congregational life into practical capacities for livelihood support, mutual aid, and community reorganisation. Empirically, the article shows that the church emerged in a context marked by illness, economic insecurity, burdensome ritual obligations, and the search for a renewed moral order. Analytically, it demonstrates how religious resources operate through trust, discipline, brokerage, and moral legitimacy. The case contributes to debates in the anthropology of religion, the anthropology of Christianity, and religion-and-development scholarship by showing how a local church in upland Vietnam can function simultaneously as a moral community, a broker of opportunity, and an important part of the infrastructure of social life.

Index Terms religious resources; anthropology of religion; Hmong Protestantism; moral community; livelihood change; upland Vietnam

I. Introduction

In Hmong communities, conversion to Protestantism is not merely a change in religious belief. In many cases, it is also a profound transformation in worldview, moral authority, the structure of family and lineage relations, life-cycle rituals, conceptions of life and death, attitudes toward the body, illness, the environment, labour, and the future of the younger generation. For that reason, research on Protestantism among the Hmong should not end with questions about who converted, when conversion occurred, or through which channels it spread; it must also address a broader and more fundamental question: how has religion been received, localised, and transformed by the community into a social resource?

Ta Phin, located in the Sa Pa area of Lao Cai Province, is analytically significant because it is both a long-established Hmong settlement and a locality increasingly shaped by market expansion, community-based tourism, labour mobility, cultural circulation, and rapid transformations in everyday life. It is within this convergence of social and economic changes that the Ta Phin Protestant Church took shape and gradually expanded. Seen only at the surface level, the church appears as a religious organisation and a space of worship.

Viewed from an ethnographic perspective, however, it also emerges as a social setting in which social trust is cultivated, mutual support is organised, practical knowledge is exchanged, moral conduct is reordered, and livelihood change is given collective form.

This article makes three related contributions. Empirically, it offers a detailed and fine-grained account of a particular Hmong Protestant church, rather than treating Protestantism only at the provincial or regional scale. Analytically, it conceptualises the church as an intermediary institution through which faith is translated into social capital, religious doctrine into everyday moral discipline, and communal worship into collective capacity. Comparatively, it brings a northern Vietnamese case into direct dialogue with wider debates in the anthropology of Christianity and religion-and-development scholarship, showing how a local church can function simultaneously as a moral community, a broker of resources, and a practical infrastructure of everyday life.

II. Literature Review

The first major strand of scholarship focuses on the history of the introduction and subsequent development of Protes-

tantism among the Hmong. Studies within this strand typically examine phases of missionary activity, routes of religious diffusion, the roles of radio broadcasts and audio recordings, the activities of evangelists, denominational formations, and the wider context of state policy toward Protestantism. The particular strength of this body of research lies in demonstrating that Protestantism among the Hmong did not emerge as a sudden or isolated phenomenon but the outcome of a gradual process of transmission, adaptation, and formalization within a specific socio-political context [1], [2].

The second major strand examines the cultural and social transformations experienced by Hmong communities following conversion to Protestantism. Scholars working in this area have addressed changes in funerary and marriage practices, ancestor worship, lineage relations, the decline or restructuring of certain traditional rituals, shifts in hygiene, domestic life, the use of modern medical services, attitudes toward education, gender relations, and broader patterns of everyday life. This direction is particularly useful because it places religion in an organic relationship with daily life and shows that conversion is not simply a change of belief but a transformation of an entire way of life [3]–[6].

The third strand situates Protestantism in relation to state administration, security concerns, social stability, and policies concerning ethnicity and religion. Studies of this kind pay particular attention to the registration of congregational points, the recognition of organisations, relations between believers and local authorities, concerns about community division, the emergence of conflicts between converts and non-converts, and the gradual adjustment of policy toward more flexible forms over time. Although this is an important field of research, some contributions adopt a predominantly top-down perspective that can obscure the agency and self-organising capacity of believing communities [4], [6].

The fourth strand, more prominent in international scholarship, approaches Hmong Christian communities through the analytical lenses of religious globalization, transnational circulations of faith, the restructuring of moral authority, and the formation of new developmental networks. At the same time, scholarship on religion and development suggests that religious organisations may possess distinctive social assets such as credibility, networked reach, the capacity to articulate alternative visions of development, and forms of social and moral “infrastructure that help sustain community life [7]–[10]. Together, these works broaden the comparative perspective and situate Hmong Protestantism in Vietnam within wider regional and global scholarly debates.

Among studies directly related to Lao Cai, Nguyen Quynh Tram’s doctoral dissertation on the culture of Hmong Protestants in Lao Cai Province is of foundational importance. A distinctive feature of this study is its examination of Hmong cultural transformation across particularly concrete dimensions, ranging from family and lineage organisation, life-cycle rituals, and lifestyles to gender relations, transformations in spiritual space, and changes in community life. More importantly, the study neither idealises nor rejects Protestantism

outright, but emphasises the dual nature of transformation: the reduction of certain harmful customs, the easing of ritual burdens, and improved hygienic awareness, while also recognising the potential erosion of certain elements of traditional culture and the emergence of new divisions within the community itself [5].

In addition, the studies undertaken by Ngo Tam T. T., Nguyen Khac Duc, Seb Rumsby, Timothy Gorman, Tran Thi Phuong Anh, and other scholars reveal several additional and important analytical dimensions. Some emphasise the appeal of Protestantism to the Hmong in its capacity to simplify ritual, provide a new moral order, and encourage new understandings of contemporary social life [2], [4], [6]. Others are concerned with the role of pastors, group leaders, or indigenous Christian elites as development brokers or intermediary actors connecting the community to external resources [11]. Of particular note, the quantitative study conducted by Rumsby and Gorman suggests that religion may also be associated with distinctive trajectories of mobility and education among upland Hmong communities, while Tran Thi Phuong Anh’s case study directly illuminates the relationship between religion and economic development among Hmong communities in the northern borderlands [12], [13].

Taken as a whole, however, many existing studies continue to approach Protestantism primarily at the regional or provincial level, or adopt a broadly descriptive approach to cultural change. Relatively few studies examine an individual congregation in depth and treat the specific church as their central unit of analysis. Yet it is precisely at the level of the church that the crucial mechanisms by which faith is transformed into social resources become most visible. A church is not only a place for prayer gatherings; it can also be a setting in which people meet, receive counsel and moral guidance, obtain material assistance, exchange livelihood knowledge, reconcile conflicts, and gain access to developmental opportunities. For this reason, research focused on the Ta Phin Church can contribute a valuable and much-needed micro-level perspective to the broader field of Hmong Protestant studies today.

III. Theoretical Orientation and Analytical Approach

This article adopts the concept of religious resources as its central analytical framework. The term refers not merely to doctrine or private religious belief, but also to the broader constellation of symbolic meanings, moral authority, relations of trust, organisational capacities, and networked forms of support that are generated through religious life and can be mobilised in social reproduction and local development. This understanding draws on the anthropology of Christianity, which treats Christian communities as historically situated social formations rather than as purely doctrinal systems [14], [15], on research concerned with Christian modernity and the semiotics of moral transformation [16], and on scholarship that identifies credibility, networks, and alternative moral visions as religious assets in development processes [7]–[9].

Within this conceptual understanding, religious resources

comprise at least five closely interrelated components. The first is faith. Faith is not only belief in the divine, but also belief in the meaningfulness of life, belief in the possibility of overcoming crisis, belief in the value of changing one's way of life, and belief in a community that shares a moral framework. In contexts of uncertainty, faith functions as a psychological and symbolic foundation through which people may begin to re-establish a meaningful sense of order.

The second component is moral authority. Pastors, group leaders, and other church leaders are not simply ritual specialists; they are also figures authorized to interpret right and wrong, good and bad, and what one ought or ought not to do in everyday life. Such authority gives the church a subtle, yet potentially profound, capacity to influence the conduct of individuals and families in everyday life.

The third component is community cohesion. Religious life creates regular networks of encounter, relations of trust, principles of mutual support, and a sense of shared responsibility. These relationships provide a foundation for social capital, understood here as durable social connections that can be mobilised to sustain life, share risks, organise collective action, and absorb innovation [17].

The fourth component consists of moral discipline and norms governing everyday life. Religion not only provides meaning but also establishes frameworks for everyday life. Prohibitions and injunctions relating to alcohol, violence, family relations, funerary practices, education, hygiene, or labour become forms of moral regulation. Once established and reproduced through collective practice, such norms may be understood as part of a moral economy that links right conduct to social reproduction, reciprocity, and the management of scarcity [18].

The fifth component is the capacity to establish and sustain connections beyond the immediate congregation. A church may serve as a bridge between the community and external resources such as businesses, support programmes, production techniques, tourism, health care, or education. In settings where upland communities often lack information and effective intermediary institutions, this connective role becomes especially important. It is also one of the ways in which religious communities operate as infrastructures of mediation, linking moral credibility to access, circulation, and brokerage [10], [11].

From this analytical perspective, the church is understood as an intermediary social institution. It does not replace the state, nor does it erase the role of older institutions such as lineages or village elders. Rather, it operates in the middle space where existing fractures within community life can be addressed through shared faith, mutual support, and collective organisational capacity. Approaching the church in this way makes it possible to see why religion can intervene effectively in domains of social activity that may not initially appear to be religious in character, such as livelihood development, the prevention of early marriage, the reform of funerary practices, the reduction of domestic violence, or the mediation of community disputes.

This approach also helps avoid two familiar extremes. The first is to regard religion exclusively as an obstacle to modernisation or as a potential source of cultural conflict. The second is to romanticise religion by treating it as a self-evident solution to complex social problems. The Ta Phin case calls for a more balanced interpretation: religion may constitute a significant social resource, but it operates within particular historical, economic, cultural, and political conditions and may produce both constructive outcomes and social tensions.

IV. Field Site, Ethnographic Materials, and Methods

Ta Phin is situated in the Sa Pa area of Lao Cai Province, a region long associated with Hmong settlement and a particularly rich cultural heritage. Yet Ta Phin today is no longer functions as a relatively self-contained upland village in the conventional sense. With the expansion of tourism, the market economy, and new forms of mobility, the locality is witnessing the rapid growth of homestays, community-based tourism, medicinal-plant cultivation, and service activities linked to visitors. These developments create new opportunities, but they also generate pressures associated with adaptation, economic competition, and social reorganisation within individual households and the wider community.

In such a context, a religious congregation may become a significant social actor. The church both inherits pre-existing community ties and establishes new networks and normative frameworks. For that reason, studying the Ta Phin Protestant Church is not simply a matter of studying a group of believers; it is also a way of examining a social institution participating in the reorganisation of community life under conditions of rapid local change.

The article draws on two principal bodies of material. The first, and most important, consists of ethnographic data collected by the author during fieldwork in Ta Phin. Fieldwork included participant observation in the Protestant community, attendance at Sunday worship and congregational gatherings, observation of everyday interactions in believing households, and more than ten in-depth interviews conducted with members of the Hmong Protestant community. Additional interviews were also conducted with local officials responsible for religious affairs in order to situate congregational life within the wider local governance context.

Among those consulted, two interlocutors served as the principal focal cases: Pastor Chang A Cang and Ms. Ly Thi May. The author spent considerably more time engaging with these two interlocutors than with other interviewees, returning to their accounts across multiple conversations in order to reconstruct the historical emergence of the church, pastoral orientations, moral change within households, and the lived experience of belonging to a Protestant congregation. Materials from Pastor Chang A Cang are especially important for tracing the formation of the church, the development of congregational points, and the church's orientations toward livelihood improvement, funerary reform, marriage, and everyday discipline. Materials from Ms. Ly Thi May illuminate how these processes are lived from within the believing

community, especially in relation to domestic life, moral self-cultivation, and the meanings attached to conversion.

The second body of material comprises published scholarly studies on Hmong Protestantism in Lao Cai and the northern uplands, especially the dissertation of Nguyen Quynh Tram, the works of Ngo Tam T. T., Nguyen Khac Duc, Seb Rumsby, Timothy Gorman, Tran Thi Phuong Anh, and selected international scholarship on Christianity, religious resources, and religion in development. These materials provide the broader scholarly context within which the Ta Phin case can be interpreted comparatively.

Methodologically, the article is not designed to constitute a statistically representative survey; rather, it offers an ethnographically grounded analysis of locally situated social processes. It combines participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and close reading of documentary sources in order to reconstruct the mechanisms through which the church operates in everyday life. The analytical strategy is interpretive and comparative: local materials are read alongside scholarship on Hmong Protestantism, the anthropology of Christianity, and religion and development in order to clarify how faith, moral authority, social trust, and organisational capacity become mutually reinforcing through everyday practice.

V. The Emergence of the Ta Phin Church Amid Crises of Everyday Life

According to interview materials, the Ta Phin Church took shape in 2007, at a time when only two households initially followed the new religious faith. This story of origin shows that the church did not appear as a ready-made religious structure implanted into the community; rather, it emerged in response to crises, uncertainties, and practical needs arising within local community life. In Pastor Chang A Cang's account, one of the most important reasons for conversion was illness and the perception that established ritual practices were no longer sufficient to resolve persistent difficulties in everyday life. This pattern resonates with broader studies showing that Hmong conversion often takes place at moments of affliction, uncertainty, and moral searching, when Protestantism offers both a new symbolic language of suffering and a new practical order of life [1], [2], [4].

From an anthropological perspective, illness is not simply a biological phenomenon. In many traditional communities, it also signals an imbalance in relations among humans, ancestors, the invisible world, nature, and the wider community. When established explanatory and healing practices lose their perceived symbolic effectiveness or become increasingly burdensome in economic terms, people may turn to a new symbolic system. In this case, prayer and Christian faith provide a new way of interpreting suffering, an alternative understanding of healing, and a renewed sense of spiritual protection. Such shifts are not only theological but also moral and semiotic, involving new ways of construing agency, responsibility, and the material efficacy of ritual practice [15], [16].

When considered solely at the level of the individual, this

process might be described as conversion under difficult circumstances. But when placed within a wider social context, it is more accurately understood as a search to re-establish order in life. When families face illness, poverty, and ritual pressure, they need not only supernatural reassurance but also a different way of living, a different mode of organisation, and a different kind of community upon which they can depend for support. This is why conversion here should be seen not only as a spiritual act but also as a social choice. Similar dynamics have been noted in studies of Hmong Protestantism in northern Vietnam, where conversion frequently accompanies aspirations toward a more disciplined moral order and a less burdensome ritual life [3]–[6].

Another factor emphasised in the interviews is the financial burden of ritual expenditure and older sacrificial practices. These practices consumed household resources while prolonging anxiety, whereas Protestantism was seen as lighter, more economical, and more practical for poor households. This point is important because it shows that the appeal of the new religion lies not only in abstract doctrine, but also in its perceived capacity to offer an alternative structure of life that is at once economic, moral, and spiritual. In this respect, the Ta Phin case also recalls what Scott called a 'moral economy', in which household survival and the ethical management of scarce resources become central considerations in decisions that may outwardly appear to be exclusively religious [18].

The formation of the church was not smooth. The materials indicate that early converts faced pressure, that some were required to sign commitments not to follow the religion, and that Pastor Chang A Cang at one point had to leave the area temporarily. These details show that the emergence of the church was bound up with conflicts of normativity and symbolic struggle within the community, a pattern that has also been noted in wider studies of Hmong Protestantism, where conversion may generate both new solidarities and new boundaries [1], [4]. Yet the subsequent survival and growth of the church indicate that the new religious faith was also capable of fostering resilience and enduring collective solidarity. Shared belief, especially when forged under pressure, quickly becomes a basis of cohesion: believers are linked not only by faith in God but also by the memory of being tested together and by a shared search for a viable future.

In this sense, the formation of the Ta Phin Church should be understood less as the technical outcome of missionary expansion than as a social response to crisis. The church arose in a space where older structures of religious practice no longer fully addressed the needs of households, and where the community was searching for a new moral and livelihood order. Read this way, conversion appears not as a derivative sign of modernisation but as an active local project of re-ordering social life under conditions of uncertainty, a point that resonates strongly with anthropological work on Christian transformation and moral remaking [15], [16].

VI. The Church as a Religious Resource for Local Livelihoods

What stands out most clearly in the Ta Phin case is that the church does not regard religious faith as separate from material subsistence, household welfare, and the reproduction of local livelihoods. According to interview materials, the church regularly pays attention to agriculture, animal husbandry, sturgeon farming, homestay work, medicinal-plant cultivation, and other locally grounded economic models. Each year, meetings and exchanges among congregational points discuss ways of making a living, emphasising that people do not necessarily need to leave their home communities in search of wage labour but can seek to develop livelihoods on their own ground. During spiritual retreats and church training activities, discussions of household economic development are closely intertwined with religious practice and communal life. This finding converges with scholarship showing that religious communities can provide not only moral consolation but also practical visions of development and trusted channels for livelihood advice [7]–[9].

It is in this context that the church emerges as a distinctive actor in local development. It is not a business, not a cooperative in the economic sense, and not an agricultural extension agency. Yet it may nonetheless perform a function that many other institutions find difficult to achieve: it can generate moral and spiritual motivation for economic action. When diligence, thrift, sobriety, and freedom from idleness are construed as part of proper religious life, economic behaviour is placed within a more compelling value framework. Believers are encouraged to regard work not simply as a means of earning income, but also as part of living in a manner they understand to be morally responsible. This is why religion may function as a form of developmental resource rather than merely as a background worldview, particularly where trust, credibility, and moral orientation are as important as material inputs [7]–[9].

The church's role in livelihood support can be analysed at four levels. First, it redefines labour as an important moral value. In many poor settings, important changes do not necessarily emerge immediately from new production techniques, but may instead begin with a transformation in prevailing attitudes toward labour and consumption. When the community comes to regard local production, livestock raising, gradual accumulation, and the avoidance of wasteful ritual or drinking expenses as a desirable pathway for family life, a renewed moral and psychological foundation for local development can be established. This helps explain why livelihood change in Ta Phin cannot be reduced to technical innovation alone; it is also a shift in moral economy, in Scott's sense, because questions of subsistence, prudence, and household survival are embedded in ethical judgments about proper conduct [18].

Second, the church creates and maintains social spaces for collective learning. Meetings among congregational points, spiritual retreats, and regular church activities are not simply spaces for prayer; they are also settings in which believers exchange experience, observe one another, learn from one

another, and are encouraged by examples of success. In conditions where upland communities often face informational constraints and limited access to formal learning, this horizontal pedagogical function is particularly significant. It also resembles what recent research has identified as the value of religious networks as channels of credibility and diffusion in development processes [8], [9].

Third, the church serves as an intermediary channel linking members of the community to external developmental resources and opportunities. Interview materials indicate that the church has connections with tourism companies, crop research, and livelihood models involving cardamom, star anise, artichokes, sturgeon, and laying hens. Such connections are not merely informational. They are grounded in trust between the community and those who mediate access. In many upland settings, the problem is not necessarily a complete absence of opportunities, but the limited availability of credible intermediaries capable of connecting people to them. Here the church, through its moral authority, performs a role comparable to that described by Rumsby in his analysis of Hmong Christian elites as political and development brokers [11].

Fourth, the church contributes to the formation of what may be described as the social and moral infrastructure underpinning sustainable livelihoods: trust, discipline, responsibility, cooperation, mutual aid, and the habit of learning. This dimension is often overlooked by development approaches that privilege material infrastructure or financial capital. Yet some development initiatives encounter difficulties not simply because of technological constraints, but because the relationships of social trust and collective organisation required for their implementation remain weak. In that respect, the Ta Phin case can also be placed in dialogue with studies that describe religion as a form of social or moral infrastructure sustaining everyday collective life [10].

A particularly important example of the church's capacity to organise resources is the auction held during Sunday gatherings. According to supplementary materials, the items auctioned are typically local products and productive resources directly tied to livelihood, such as medicinal seedlings, pumpkin seeds, beans, maize seeds, taro varieties, ginger, pork, buffalo meat, and sticky-rice cakes. The money raised through repeated auctions may amount to several million Vietnamese dong and is placed in the church fund to support households facing hardship. These accounts suggest that religious practice here does not stop at strengthening faith; it also creates an economic-moral space in which resources are mobilised publicly, voluntarily, and communally and then redistributed through internal mutual aid. In comparative terms, this resembles what religion-and-development scholarship identifies as the capacity of faith communities to transform trust and shared moral language into concrete redistributive practice [7], [8].

From the perspective of economic anthropology, the Sunday auction is a distinctive form of exchange located at the intersection of economy, morality, and religion. The items placed in the auction are not merely anonymous market commodities, but products closely associated with local labour,

seasonal cycles, and the everyday life of the Hmong highlands. Once they enter church space, they simultaneously carry use value, symbolic value, and moral value. Participants are not merely buying goods; they are also taking part in an act of offering and communal solidarity. In that sense, the auction does more than raise funds: it strengthens the feeling of belonging to the church and reaffirms the principle that the fruits of individual labour may be shared to support those in difficulty. It is precisely this intertwining of economic practice and moral community that makes the Ta Phin case analytically significant.

Another point that deserves emphasis is the relationship between the church's developmental orientation and the wider transformation of the locality. Ta Phin is a place where community tourism, homestays, medicinal plants, and upland commodities are all expanding. The church does not stand outside this process; rather, it encourages believers to participate in it in a more disciplined, purposeful, and family-oriented way. This suggests that religion in this setting does not necessarily stand in opposition to modernisation; instead, it actively participates in shaping a locally specific pathway of social and economic modernisation. This observation also resonates with recent quantitative work suggesting that religion may be linked to distinctive trajectories of mobility and education among Hmong communities in upland Vietnam [12].

From this broader analytical perspective, it can therefore be argued that the church in Ta Phin has helped transform religious resources into practical resources for community development. Faith becomes a motive for changing one's way of life. Religious practice becomes a space for sharing knowledge, cultivating aspirations, and creating a mutual-aid fund. The moral authority of religious leaders becomes a means of connecting the community to livelihood opportunities. This is precisely the mechanism through which the church participates in improving economic life at the local level.

VII. The Church and the Reworking of Funerary Practices

Funerary practice constitutes one of the domains in which the influence of Protestantism on Hmong communities can be observed particularly clearly. In traditional life, funerals are not only rites for sending off the dead; they also provide occasions for expressing relationships with ancestors, family status, kinship solidarity, and deeply embedded symbolic meanings concerning life, death, the soul, and the afterlife. Because they carry so many layers of meaning, funerary practices can be prolonged and may require substantial material and financial resources. Previous scholarship on Hmong Protestantism has repeatedly shown that funerary reform is one of the most sensitive and consequential arenas of cultural change after conversion [1], [4], [5].

According to interview materials, in the Protestant community of Ta Phin, when someone dies, other households within the congregation usually contribute rice and meat in order to support the bereaved family. According to these accounts, burial generally takes place promptly, with funerary

arrangements not extending beyond forty-eight hours. Many practices that previously required heavy expenditure or put pressure on local resources—such as cutting large quantities of wood, slaughtering numerous animals, or organising feasts lasting several days—are significantly reduced. This indicates that the church has helped shape a new funerary model in which an emphasis on extensive ritual expenditure gives way to a stronger emphasis on household thrift and reciprocal community support.

The significance of this change lies not only in saving costs. Socially, it considerably reduces the burden on households at a moment when they are already highly vulnerable. Morally, it introduces a new understanding of obligation toward both the dead and the living. Rather than emphasising the need to mobilise the greatest possible quantity of resources in order to perform a funeral “properly, the church directs believers toward compassion, support, and the preservation of household resources for the future. Environmentally, reducing highly consumptive practices may also lessen pressure on local resources. In this sense, the Ta Phin case corresponds with wider observations that Protestant funerary reform often combines moral simplification with practical household rationalization [4], [5].

However, from an ethnographic perspective, the transformation of funerary practice is not merely a technical change. It touches the core of the traditional symbolic order. When elements of older rituals are omitted or replaced, this also means that a different conception of death, ancestors, the path of the soul, and the obligations of descendants has emerged. This is precisely why, in many communities, changes in funerary practice become a source of tension between converts and non-converts. The issue is not simply about saving money; it concerns a reordering of moral and cosmological relations.

The case of Ta Phin shows that the church has, to some extent, managed this tension by replacing a mechanism of ritual display with a mechanism of community support. Instead of allowing funerals to become expressions of a household's or lineage's capacity to mobilise, the church turns them into occasions for the believing community collectively to share the burden. This represents a significant change in the structure of communal responsibilities. It not only simplifies ritual, but also moves the centre of gravity from relations with the invisible world toward concrete responsibility among the living themselves. Read comparatively, this confirms broader findings that Protestant funerary reform is never only about efficiency; it is also a reorganisation of social belonging, moral obligation, and cosmological orientation [1], [4], [5].

Viewed more broadly, the transformation of funerary practice is an exemplary illustration of the church's capacity to reorder a core cultural domain. It helps explain why the church's impact on the community does not stop at the chapel or the Sunday service, but penetrates precisely those moments of the life course that are most socially and symbolically charged.

VIII. Marriage, Youth, and the Reconfiguration of Social Futures

If funerary practice represents a domain in which the church influences understandings of death and communal obligation, marriage is a domain in which it influences the organisation of social life and the anticipated futures of younger generations. According to interview materials, the church campaigns against early marriage and encourages young men and women to reach the legally prescribed age before entering marriage, including in cases where the two families have already made preliminary marriage arrangements. At the same time, the church encourages schooling and explains to the community that marriage at an excessively early age may contribute to poverty, insufficient preparedness, and prolonged economic hardship within household life.

This is a particularly noteworthy point. In many traditional communities, marriage often occurs early and is closely tied to kinship structures, community custom, and the logic of social reproduction. When the church intervenes in age at marriage, it is not merely altering a custom; it also influences the social mechanisms through which individual life courses and the community's future are organised. In other words, the church is participating in a restructuring of how the community imagines a proper life: marriage should not happen as early as possible, but should instead be linked to schooling, maturity, self-reliance, and responsibility toward a future family. In this respect, the Ta Phin case is consistent with studies showing that Protestant conversion among the Hmong may reshape generational expectations, discipline, and aspirations for modern education [4], [5], [12].

From a development perspective, combating early marriage is not merely an administrative or legal slogan, but a process of changing value systems. In many places, despite strong state campaigns, early marriage persists because it remains embedded in established cultural expectations and because sufficiently influential community-based mechanisms for changing those expectations may be lacking. In the case of Ta Phin, the church appears, according to the ethnographic accounts, to have assumed precisely this kind of role. Through religious authority and community attachment, it can address the issue not only in the language of law, but also in the language of morality, future, and responsibility. This helps explain why Protestant congregations may sometimes be effective not because they replace formal institutions, but because they translate public concerns into locally compelling moral terms.

Of further significance is the manner in which the church explicitly links marriage-related decisions to educational aspirations. When schooling is elevated as a value to be prioritised, while early marriage is seen as an obstacle to the future, new possibilities and horizons of expectation are opened up for members of the younger generation. This has deep anthropological significance, because it shows that the church changes not only present behaviour but also the imagination of the future. A community that begins to think differently about youth, schooling, family formation, and opportunities

for advancement is already entering a deeper trajectory of transformation. This observation also speaks to recent findings that religion may be associated with alternative trajectories of mobility and educational orientation among Hmong communities in upland Vietnam [12].

Of course, this change does not take place in a vacuum. It unfolds in a context in which Ta Phin is already affected by tourism, contact with the outside world, the service economy, and new aspirations for life. What is notable, however, is that the church has become a space in which those changes are interpreted and legitimated. In other words, the church does not merely receive social change as an external influence, but also actively translates it into the normative framework of the believing community - a process that anthropological studies of Christianity have repeatedly identified as central to local Christian modernities [15], [16].

IX. The Moralization of Everyday Life

Beyond funerary practices and marriage, the church also appears to exert an important influence in domains that may seem less consequential but are in fact foundational to the organisation of everyday life. The interview materials suggest that the church encourages reductions in excessive drinking, domestic violence, and verbal abuse of children; promotes greater awareness of traffic safety; encourages the use of gas stoves instead of certain older cooking practices; and fosters greater attention to hygiene and the immediate living environment. These observations are also broadly consistent with studies on Hmong Protestantism and minority Protestant communities more generally, where conversion is often associated with new forms of domestic order, sobriety, hygiene, and self-discipline [3]–[6].

Such changes are often regarded as secondary if viewed through an administrative or economic lens. Yet from the perspective of the anthropology of everyday life, these everyday domains are precisely where the social capacities of religious institutions can become most clearly visible. Human life is determined not only by major moments such as funerals, marriages, or harvests, but first and foremost by daily repetitive habits: what one drinks, how one speaks, how one treats one's wife and children, whether one keeps the house clean, whether one travels carefully, and whether one knows how to restrain anger and desire. When the church enters precisely these domains, religion is no longer confined to moments of worship; it becomes a mechanism for shaping persons and households. This reading is consonant with wider work in the anthropology of Christianity that emphasises moral formation, embodied discipline, and everyday semiotic practice [15], [16].

This mechanism may be described as the moralisation of everyday life. Doctrine is translated into concrete exhortations. Scripture is understood not only as teaching about faith, but also as teaching about how one ought to live in family and community. A good believer is not merely someone who attends worship regularly, but someone who knows how to exercise restraint, care for the family, avoid violence, maintain

the household, and act responsibly toward oneself. This constitutes a particularly important form of internalised moral and social normativity. Unlike relatively short-lived campaigns of public or social mobilisation, religious norms, once sedimented in daily life, may have a more enduring effect because they become tied to moral identity itself. This reading is also consistent with anthropological work that treats Christian life as a process of moral formation enacted through everyday discipline, embodied practice, and semiotic self-monitoring [15], [16].

Especially in a context where the field accounts identify concerns related to excessive drinking, domestic violence, inadequate hygiene, and other practices that may affect health and the capacity for productive labour, the church offers a new framework for self-control. Violence is not viewed only as a violation of law, but as a violation of religious life. Excessive drinking is not only a bad habit, but something that degrades the spirit, harms the family, and runs against the expectations of the believing community. When a religious community both monitors and supports its members, the possibility of behavioural change becomes more concrete.

Attention should also be paid here to the role of women and the family. Research on Protestantism in some minority communities suggests that women may be among those who most directly experience changes associated with religious conversion in everyday life, especially through reduced drinking, reduced violence, and greater household stability. Although this article does not develop a full gender analysis, the Ta Phin accounts nevertheless suggest that the church may have contributed to a more disciplined domestic environment, with fewer reported conflicts and a stronger emphasis on shared household responsibility. This is one area in which future work could productively deepen the analysis by exploring how religious change is experienced differently across gender and generation.

Thus, if funerary practice and marriage show that the church intervenes in major thresholds of the life course, everyday life shows that it also influences behaviour at the micro-level of repeated daily interactions. It is precisely in these micro-levels that religion demonstrates one of its deepest capacities for social transformation.

X. The Church as an Intermediary Institution

A particularly noteworthy aspect of the Ta Phin case is that the church is engaged not only in religious observance and family life, but also in a range of community affairs, including sharing livelihood experiences, paying attention to environmental hygiene, providing support after natural disasters, mediating some disputes, and even exercising a limited but recognisable voice in matters concerning land use and relations among households. This makes it possible to identify the church as an intermediary social institution.

In rural and upland societies, especially in areas undergoing rapid change, a gap may emerge between the formal responsibilities of state institutions and the everyday experiences and practical needs of the community. Local government

possesses legal authority, but it does not always possess the time, sustained access, or culturally embedded legitimacy needed to engage with every aspect of everyday community life. Traditional institutions such as lineages, village heads, and customary law still play a role, but they too are changing and may be fragmented or weakened under the impact of the market economy and social mobility. In such a context, the church can emerge as a new institution capable of filling part of that gap.

The church's intermediary role is grounded, first, in its distinctive forms of moral authority. When a pastor or church leader offers advice, that advice is not understood merely as the opinion of an individual. It is received by the community as guidance linked to religious life, to the will of God, and to the norms of the collective of believers. This gives the church a form of informal or soft power that can nevertheless exert considerable practical influence. It is precisely through this soft power that the church can intervene in matters that are not entirely and purely religious.

The second dimension of this intermediary role lies in the church's capacity to sustain social networks. The church gathers people in worship meetings, community events, and difficult moments such as illness, funerals, and natural disasters. This network allows information to circulate more quickly, support to be mobilised more easily, and collective action to be coordinated more effectively. In a community where households may be scattered and busy with livelihood work, the church network creates a regular, stable, and morally charged mechanism of connection.

Another aspect of this intermediary role is the capacity to broker between the community and external resources. When tourism businesses, livelihood support programmes, crop research initiatives, or other opportunities for cooperation appear, the church can introduce such opportunities, lend credibility to those providing them, encourage community participation, or help identify which opportunities may be appropriate for local conditions. This role is especially important because, in many cases, what prevents upland people from accessing opportunities is not only a lack of capital or technique, but also a lack of trust and a lack of reliable social bridges.

In particular, the fundraising auctions held during Sunday gatherings show that the church is not only a place for teaching doctrine but also a space for organising social resources. Through forms of contribution tied to local products, the church creates a mutual-aid fund capable of assisting households in difficulty, thereby strengthening cohesion and the self-regulatory capacity of the believing community.

The concept of intermediary institution helps clarify why the church in Ta Phin can affect so many domains at once. It is not a state agency, not a business, and not a traditional lineage institution, yet at an informal level it may perform functions that overlap, to a limited extent, with those of several such institutions. It provides moral direction, material support, information, mediation, mutual assistance, and a foundation for cohesion. That is precisely why the church should be

understood as a multifunctional social structure rather than merely as a religious meeting point.

XI. Discussion: Religion as a Development Resource and its Limits

The Ta Phin case contributes to at least three wider conversations in the anthropology of religion. First, it addresses debates about the social productivity of religious life; second, it contributes to scholarship on Christianity as a locally re-worked moral formation; and third, it informs religion-and-development research concerned with the institutional capacities through which religious communities organise trust, brokerage, and practical support.

First, this case shows that religion needs to be understood as a social resource and not merely as a system of belief. The church does not simply provide spiritual salvation; it also creates social conditions for development: faith, discipline, cohesion, mutual support, opportunities for learning, and connective capacity. These dimensions are not easily captured by conventional quantitative indicators, but they can be decisive in shaping how a community organises itself, cooperates, and responds to social change. In this respect, the Ta Phin case adds ethnographic specificity to broader arguments in the field of religion and development that religious organisations often contribute credibility, moral motivation, networks, and alternative developmental visions that are highly consequential on the ground [7]–[9].

Second, the Ta Phin case demonstrates the strong localisation of Protestantism. Protestantism here does not operate as a simple replica of Western Protestantism, but is transformed in accordance with the needs and conditions of the local community. This transformation is visible in the way doctrine is linked to the prevention of early marriage, the reduction of funeral costs, homestay work, medicinal plants, sturgeon farming, hygiene, the reduction of domestic violence, and fundraising for internal support. In other words, Protestantism in Ta Phin becomes a new moral order tightly bound to the livelihood context and social change of the locality. This interpretation is consistent with established anthropological approaches that stress translation, localisation, and the remaking of Christianity in specific cultural worlds [14]–[16].

Third, this case shows that community development cannot rely solely on material infrastructure or technical support, but must also attend to moral and social infrastructure. It is this infrastructure that enables a community to accept innovation, sustain discipline, and cooperate. The church is one of the institutions that can help to create and sustain such an infrastructure. This observation can also be read comparatively alongside scholarship that treats religion as a form of social infrastructure or intermediary capacity through which development is made credible and actionable in everyday life [9], [10]. The Ta Phin case therefore suggests that local churches should be analysed not only as communities of belief but also as organisational forms that mediate between household ethics, communal trust, and wider developmental opportunities.

However, the Ta Phin case also reveals important limitations and tensions that need to be recognised explicitly.

First, any process of moral reordering may also lead to the weakening of certain traditional cultural practices. When funerals, ancestor worship, some forms of kinship relation, or practices associated with older belief systems are omitted or evaluated negatively, part of the community's cultural heritage may also fade. The positive social effects should not cause us to overlook this dimension.

Second, in a community where not everyone follows the religion, the growing influence of the church as a moral institution can also create new social boundaries. Even if tensions diminish over time, the possibility of discrimination, suspicion, or distance between believers and non-believers remains something that must be noted. The church's internal cohesion may at times be accompanied by symbolic differentiation from the rest of the community.

Third, the role of the church should not be idealised or presented as a comprehensive solution to every social problem. The church may be strong in moral guidance, connection, mutual support, and the mobilisation of faith, but it cannot completely replace public policy, infrastructure, formal education, professional health care, or legal protection. Its role therefore needs to be placed within relationships of complementarity, interaction, and negotiation with other social institutions.

From these points, the article argues that the most appropriate approach is a balanced one. It is necessary to recognise the productive role of religion in community development while also identifying the tensions and socio-cultural limits it may entail. Only by maintaining such a balanced analytical perspective can anthropological research on religion remain both academically rigorous and practically useful.

XII. Conclusion

The Ta Phin Protestant Church offers a compelling illustration of how religion in upland Vietnam can become an important social resource within processes of local community development. From a small group formed amid illness, poverty, ritual burdens, and the search for a new moral order, the church developed into a network of faith with a visible influence on livelihoods, moral life, and community organisation in the locality.

Economically, the church encourages locally grounded livelihood strategies, redefines labour as a form of moral responsibility, creates spaces of collective learning, and connects believers with livelihood opportunities associated with livestock raising, medicinal plants, homestays, and community tourism. In particular, the fundraising auctions held during Sunday gatherings show that the church is also capable of mobilising and redistributing resources within religious life itself, thereby directly assisting households in difficulty and reinforcing communal solidarity.

At the social level, the church contributes to changes in funerary practices, efforts to discourage early marriage, initiatives intended to reduce excessive drinking and domestic violence, and programmes promoting greater attention to hy-

giene and responsibility in everyday life. In terms of community organisation, the church emerges as an intermediary institution capable of generating moral authority, mobilising mutual support, mediating conflicts, and filling gaps not fully covered by other institutions.

From the perspective of religious resources, it can be seen that a central contribution of the Ta Phin Church lies in the manner in which it has helped translate religious faith into social capital, doctrine into a mechanism for the moral reordering of conduct, religious practice into a driver of community development, and voluntary contributions by believers into a morally and socially grounded fund of mutual assistance. In other words, religion here is not only a supernatural belief, but also a mode of organising life, a foundation for community self-reliance, and an agent of social transformation.

At the same time, the article also shows that this case must be understood in its dual character. The reported positive changes in livelihoods and everyday practices are significant within the studied community, but they are also accompanied by the possibility of weakening certain traditional cultural practices and creating new boundaries within the community. For that reason, the appropriate approach is neither to idealise nor to dismiss the role of the church, but to understand it as a social entity moving in continuous negotiation with indigenous culture, the state, and the contemporary transformations of upland life.

Further research involving longer-term fieldwork, systematic comparison with other churches in the Sa Pa area and elsewhere in Lao Cai Province, and additional interviews with believers, non-believers, local authorities, and development actors would allow these arguments to be examined in greater depth. Even so, the Ta Phin case already demonstrates that attention to religious resources can substantially enrich anthropological understandings of social transformation in Vietnam's ethnic minority highlands.

Competing Interests

The author declares that there are no competing interests relating to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Data Availability

This article draws on qualitative fieldwork observations, interview materials, and previously published scholarly sources.

Funding

The author acknowledges the national-level scientific and technological project "Research and Promotion of the Values and Humanistic Resources of the Northern Midlands and Mountainous Region for National Development in the New Period" (Project Code: KX03.17/21-30), within the framework of which this article was developed.

References

- [1] Tapp, N. (1989). The impact of missionary Christianity upon marginalized ethnic minorities: The case of the Hmong. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 20(1), 70–95. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463400019858>

- [2] Ngô, T. T. T. (2010). Ethnic and transnational dimensions of recent Protestant conversion among the Hmong in northern Vietnam. *Social Compass*, 57(3), 332–344. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768610375518>
- [3] Nguyen, V. H., & Do, Q. S. (2009). Influences of Protestantism on some traditional cultural values of Hmong ethnic people in Lao Cai Province of Vietnam. *SUVANNABHUMI*, 1(2), 43–71. <https://doi.org/10.22801/svn.2009.1.2.43>
- [4] Ngo, T. T. T. (2015). Protestant conversion and social conflict: The case of the Hmong in contemporary Vietnam. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 46(2), 274–292. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463415000089>
- [5] Nguyen, Q. T. (2016). *The culture of Hmong Protestants in Lao Cai Province* [Doctoral dissertation, Graduate Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences; title translated from Vietnamese].
- [6] Nguyen, K. D. (2024). Protestantism among the Hmong people in the mountainous region of contemporary northern Vietnam. *Religions*, 15(2), Article 187. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020187>
- [7] Tomalin, E. (2012). Thinking about faith-based organisations in development: Where have we got to and what next? *Development in Practice*, 22(5–6), 689–703. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2012.686600>
- [8] Wilkinson, O. (2022). Re-framing common themes in religions and development research. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 20(4), 91–106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2022.2139542>
- [9] Koehrsen, J., & Burchardt, M. (2024). Religion and development: Alternative visions, credibility, and networks as religious assets for sustainable development? *Progress in Development Studies*, 24(2), 129–146. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14649934231206302>
- [10] Thompson, D. C. (2022). Evangelical Christianity as infrastructure in Brazil's penal system. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 54(3), 457–479. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X22000426>
- [11] Rumsby, S. (2021). Hmong Christian elites as political and development brokers: Competition, cooperation and mimesis in Vietnam's highlands. *Social Anthropology*, 29(3), 701–717. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.13090>
- [12] Rumsby, S., & Gorman, T. (2023). Alternative development trajectories? A quantitative analysis of religion as a vector of mobility and education among the Hmong in upland Vietnam. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 101, Article 103057. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2023.103057>
- [13] Tran, T. P. A. (2024). Religion and economic development of Protestant Hmong people in the northern border area of Vietnam: A case study of the Hmong in Sin Suoi Ho Village, Phong Tho District, Lai Chau Province [title translated from Vietnamese]. *VNU Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 10(6), 665–681. <https://doi.org/10.33100/tckhxnvnv10.6.TranThiPhuongAnh>
- [14] Bialecki, J., Haynes, N., & Robbins, J. (2008). The anthropology of Christianity. *Religion Compass*, 2(6), 1139–1158. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2008.00116.x>
- [15] Robbins, J. (2014). The anthropology of Christianity: Unity, diversity, new directions: An introduction to supplement 10. *Current Anthropology*, 55(S10), S157–S171. <https://doi.org/10.1086/678289>
- [16] Keane, W. (2007). *Christian moderns: Freedom and fetish in the mission encounter*. University of California Press. <https://www.ucpress.edu/books/christian-moderns/epub-pdf>
- [17] Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster. https://books.google.com/books/about/Bowling_Alone.html?id=rd2ibodep7UC
- [18] Scott, J. C. (1976). *The moral economy of the peasant: Rebellion and subsistence in Southeast Asia*. Yale University Press. <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300185553/the-moral-economy-of-the-peasant/>

...