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AN ENCOUNTER BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Examining Shamanism, Christianity, and Nature in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Inspired by Joel Robbins's call for theology and anthropology to collaborate as theoretical partners, in this article, I examine the theologian Jojo M. Fung's recent books, *Sacred Sustainability*, *Polyhedral Christianity* and *Cosmic Challenges* (2025) and *A Shamanic Pneumatology in a Mystical Age of Sacred Sustainability* (2017) from the point of view of an anthropologist. In these books, Fung builds a theoretical bridge to connect the Creative Spirit in the creation narratives of Genesis to spirits of nature in indigenous religious practices, in what he calls "creational pneumatology." I argue that Fung's theological engagement with indigenous religious communities in Southeast Asia illuminates the secular assumptions of the "more-than-human" turn in anthropology and beyond, and how such a turn remains inextricably tied to the "human" even in attempts to exceed it. Yet, I also point out that theologians like Fung can benefit from anthropology's epistemic tools in explicitly highlighting how one's interpretive lens colors one's perception of the Other. Orchestrating this interdisciplinary dialogue between theology and anthropology illuminates the premises and assumptions embedded in each discipline, which will ultimately sharpen their respective aims.

Keywords: pneumatology, anthropology, more-than-human, shamanism, sustainability, Southeast Asia

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**PERJUMPAAN ANTARA TEOLOGI DAN
ANTROPOLOGI**
**Memeriksa Shamanisme, Kristianitas, dan Alam di Asia
Tenggara**

Abstrak

Terinspirasi oleh Joel Robbin yang mengajak teologi dan antropologi untuk berkolaborasi sebagai rekan teoretis, di dalam artikel ini saya memeriksa buku-buku terbaru Jojo M. Fung, *Sacred Sustainability, Polyhedral Christianity and Cosmic Challenges* (2025) dan *A Shamanic Pneumatology in a Mystical Age of Sacred Sustainability* (2017), dari perspektif seorang antropolog. Di dalam buku-buku tersebut, Fung membangun sebuah jembatan teoretis untuk menghubungkan Roh Kreatif di dalam narasi-narasi penciptaan di kitab Kejadian dengan roh-roh alam di dalam praktik-praktik agama asli, yang ia sebut sebagai “*creational pneumatology*.” Saya berargumentasi bahwa cara Fung menghubungkan teologi dengan komunitas-komunitas agama asli di Asia Tenggara dapat menerangi asumsi-asumsi sekuler dari pergeseran ke paradigma lebih-dari-manusia (*more-than-human*) di bidang antropologi dan lainnya, serta menunjukkan bagaimana pergeseran tersebut masih juga terikat kepada “manusia” bahkan dalam upaya untuk melangkauinya. Namun demikian, saya juga menunjukkan bahwa teolog-teolog seperti Fung dapat mengambil manfaat dari alat-alat epistemis antropologi untuk secara eksplisit bisa menggarisbawahi bagaimana lensa interpretasi seseorang dapat memengaruhi persepsi orang tersebut akan yang Liyan. Dialog interdisipliner antara teologi dan antropologi ini akan menunjukkan premis-premis serta asumsi-asumsi yang terkandung di masing-masing disiplin ilmu, yang pada akhirnya dapat mempertajam tujuan-tujuan masing-masing disiplin.

Kata-kata Kunci: pneumatologi, antropologi, lebih-dari-manusia, shamanisme, kelestarian, Asia Tenggara

Introduction

Inspired by Joel Robbins’s call for theology and anthropology to collaborate as theoretical partners, in this article I examine the theologian Jojo M. Fung’s recent books, *Sacred Sustainability, Polyhedral Christianity and Cosmic Challenges* (2025) and *A Shamanic Pneumatology in a Mystical Age of Sacred Sustainability* (2017) primarily from the point of view of an anthropologist.¹ Fung is a

¹ Joel Robbins, *Theology and the Anthropology of Christian Life* (Oxford University Press, 2020);

Jesuit priest from a Hakka family in Sabah, a state in Malaysian Borneo or East Malaysia. His career has been built on extensive experiences and collaborations with indigenous communities – especially with shamans – throughout Southeast Asia. With a Master of Arts in Social Anthropology from the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, and a Doctorate in Contextual Theology from the Association of Theological Schools in Chicago, he is an associate professor at the Loyola School of Theology in Quezon City, Philippines. His most recent books aim to construct theological bridges between Christianity’s Holy Spirit and the spirit-worlds within indigenous religions, particularly as they pertain to the environment. Fung is one of the very few, if not the only, Christian theologians writing in the intersection between indigeneity, religion, and the environment in Southeast Asia.

In this paper, I ask, “What might Fung’s theologizing contribute towards the anthropological – and the larger social sciences’ – turn towards the ‘more-than-human’?” One of Fung’s main projects in both of his recent books is to introduce spirituality to the fairly secular, modern sustainability movements. For the sustainability movement to be sustainable and truly transformative, he argues, it needs to incorporate a spiritual dimension—and who better to turn to than indigenous communities who have long maintained such cosmologies and practices? The political stakes of his project – planetary sustainability – are shared by many academics who have been part of the “more-than-human” turn in the social sciences, particularly in anthropology and history. Part of this turn, which I will describe at greater length, has involved unpacking the ethical and affective relationships that indigenous communities have with plants, animals, and other “more-than-humans.” Fung eschews “more-than-human” language and instead uses “spirit” as the foundational ontological category of his analysis, thus highlighting the “humanism” of the more-than-human turn. Towards the end, I conclude with some thoughts about how the epistemological tools of anthropology can sharpen Fung’s analysis of the indigenous religious practices of Karen communities in northern Thailand.

To situate myself in this conversation: My training as a doctoral student has been in the social sciences, particularly anthropology and history. My Master’s degree, however, was at a divinity school. Prior to that, I worked at a progressive church in New York City, and I was born and raised within a charismatic church movement that my parents led as lay pastors in Sarawak and

Jojo M. Fung, *Sacred Sustainability, Polyhedral Christianity and Cosmic Challenges* (Routledge, 2025).

Jojo M. Fung, *A Shamanic Pneumatology in a Mystical Age of Sacred Sustainability* (Springer International Publishing, 2017).

Sabah. For the purposes of this article, however, I am speaking primarily as an anthropologist. My field research takes place in Sabah, where I have observed Fung's work and reputation among Catholic indigenous communities, and witnessed the high stakes of his work for them. For some of the Catholic indigenous leaders I work with in urban contexts, what they really want is not more anthropology but theology. They live in a context in which there is substantive Catholic modernist opposition or distrust of ancestral traditions that relate to spirits. What we need, as one of them told me, is Christian theological resources to bridge our faith with our ancestral spiritual heritage, which is demonized by the church. I would speculate that this desire is not an outlier in Southeast Asia, given that many indigenous peoples in this region and surrounding areas are Christian.² Indeed, my hope in writing this article for the *Indonesian Journal of Theology* is that my academic writing might be more accessible and useful to the people who live in the region of the world that I come from and study.

Thus, I approach my anthropological work with humility about the stakes of my work. Moreover, like Robbins, I believe that anthropology can learn from theology as a source of theory—arguably a more valued theoretical source in my field—not simply as a primary source to analyze with theory. Orchestrating this interdisciplinary dialogue will make clearer the premises and biases embedded in each discipline, which will ultimately sharpen their respective aims.

The (Secular) Humanist Heritage of “More-than-Human”

The “environment” or “nature” has become an increasing site of inquiry across academic disciplines, as evident by the trends towards “environmental humanities,” “posthumanism,” “more-than-human” or “multispecies” studies, and so on. A key strand within the “more-than-human” literature in anthropology and history, the disciplines that I will focus on in this article, has involved taking seriously the ontological models of indigenous communities, specifically how they treat plants, animals, and other beings as persons to whom one is bound in a set of ethical obligations. These models are framed in contrast to the modernist, humanist models that render anything outside of “the human” as inferior (i.e. “subhuman”), or at worst, inert objects that one can

² I use “indigenous” here as a label for people who make a “native” claim to land and who experience subjugation and minoritization by a nation-state. Indigenous Christian peoples thus include the Kachin, Chin and Kayin peoples in upland Myanmar; orang Dayak and orang Dusun in Borneo; Naga ethnic groups in Nagaland in northeast India; West Papuans in Indonesia; Papua New Guinea; East Timor or Timor-Leste.

use and dispose of without qualm.³ To use better language to describe these indigenous, ontological models within the English-speaking academy, many academics have adopted the phrase “more-than-human” or “beyond the human” in order to decenter the ontological primacy of the “human.”

Within Southeast Asia and Melanesia, there have been a number of recent books by anthropologists and historians with a keen eye toward what lies beyond or in excess of the “human,” such as Faizah Zakaria’s *The Camphor Tree and the Elephant: Religion and Ecological Change* (2023) and Sophie Chao’s *In the shadow of the palms: more-than-human becomings in West Papua* (2022).⁴ Zakaria, a historian, writes, for instance, of the “more-than-human religious imaginary” of the indigenous Batak people during mid-nineteenth-century Sumatra and Malaya who treated elephants, tin ores, and camphor trees—to name a few examples—as more-than-human subjects with whom humans had to engage in accordance with ethical protocol.⁵ Chao, an anthropologist who runs a “more-than-human” interview-series and newsletter, examines in her recent book the relationships between indigenous Marind people and key plants (e.g., oil palm, sago) in West Papua in order to “contribute to our understanding of changing plant-human relations in an age of rampant ecological destruction.”⁶ Climate change and ecological destruction loom either as the political backdrop or the forefront of Zakaria’s and Chao’s books.

In this literature, Christianity is usually positioned in contrast to these indigenous more-than-human cosmologies. Zakaria writes that this “more-than-human religious imaginary” was displaced starting in the mid-nineteenth century by a “rationalized practice of religion that centralized divine power and was detached from local landscapes,” such as the modernistic, monotheistic forms of Islam and Christianity.⁷ Specifically, she argues that modernist forms of Islam and Christianity have disenchanted ecological imaginations, turning something like tin ore or a camphor tree, for instance, into a “resource” or “object” instead of “spirits.” Fung would likely not disagree strongly with

³ This “human” is, of course, marked by race, class, gender, and sexuality. As many scholars in Black studies, Feminist studies, Disability studies, and Trans studies have noted, many humans have also been rendered as outside “the human” or “Man.”

⁴ Faizah Zakaria, *The Camphor Tree and the Elephant: Religion and Ecological Change in Maritime Southeast Asia* (University of Washington Press, 2023); Sophie Chao, *In the Shadow of the Palms: More-than-Human Becomings in West Papua* (Duke University Press, 2022).

⁵ Zakaria, *The Camphor Tree and the Elephant*, 4.

⁶ Sophie Chao, “Projects,” accessed June 2, 2025, <https://www.morethanhumanworlds.com/research-projects>.

⁷ Zakaria, *The Camphor Tree and the Elephant*, 185.

this historical characterization of Christianity. But his focus is on figuring out how to construct a different version of Christianity. And he is not alone in that. In *Shamanic Pneumatology*, he cites a statement titled “Indigenous Peoples’ Struggle for Justice and Liberation in Asia” by the Seventh Asian Theological Conference of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) held in the Philippines. In this statement, the theologians wrote, referring to indigenous peoples:

We need to make their spirituality of connectedness with nature and the land our own in our collective effort to heal the earth and promote collective well-being. Their intuitiveness to the life systems and interconnectedness of all earthlings make us wonder if our current way of *theologizing is inadequate* if not wanting in forging a more holistic perspective in dealing with the present global crisis.⁸

Along with other theologians in EATWOT, Fung is invested in how to theologize *better* in a way that is more adequate for the Anthropocene’s environmental crisis. Quoting from Pope Francis’ recent papal encyclicals, he calls out the cultural crisis at the heart of the current “environmental desecration by global neoliberal/state capitalism:” the culture of disposability and inordinate consumption; the idolatry of money; the cult of unlimited human power, excessive individualism, and technocracy. Ultimately, Fung places the spiritual blame for the environmental crisis at the feet of a secular, rationalistic, and humanistic worldview of neoliberal capitalism. Neoliberal, secular ideologies have spawned a “de-religionized” and consequently “de-ethicized” society—the loss of “spirits” in nature has led to a loss of “ethics” as well.⁹

But Fung thinks that the path forward is not simply “more Christianity,” for he acknowledges that the theological resources of Christianity may be inadequate for the current age of the Anthropocene. Rather, he argues, let us all turn toward indigenous movements to learn from their sustainable, sacred practices with the environment.¹⁰ “World leaders and humankind need to retrieve

⁸ Fung, *A Shamanic Pneumatology*, 109. Italics mine.

⁹ Fung, *Sacred Sustainability, Polyhedral Christianity and Cosmic Challenges*, 10.

¹⁰ Fung’s argument could be strengthened if he elaborated on why he finds the conventional forms of Christian theology inadequate for the climate crisis—for instance, why it is not enough to practice “stewardship” of the earth, as is commonly said among environmentally minded Christians? He does note

and appropriate the mystical wisdom inherent in the indigenous mystical cosmology and spirituality of sustainability,” he writes, reaching beyond the church for his audience.¹¹ But while he reaches for resources outside of the Christian tradition, he is not abandoning Christianity, but rather seeks to expand and rethink it. Unlike anthropologists and other academics who largely confine themselves to a *descriptive* analysis, Fung is actively *constructing* a grammar to bridge the “indigenous mythological spirit world and the one Holy Spirit of Christianity” – that grammar is, for him, “creational pneumatology.”¹²

Spirit as Ontological Category

Fung sets up his argument for a “creational pneumatology” primarily by using the indigenous Karen communities in northern Thailand as an example of how indigenous religions have spirit-rich worlds that include ancestral and nature spirits, which he loosely classifies under the umbrella term, “shamanic spirits.”¹³ These shamanic spirits have been guiding shamans, mystics, healers, etc., in diverse religiocultural communities. He makes a theological argument to say that these spirits also participate in the spirit power of *Rûah Elohim*, or God’s Creative Spirit, who hovers over the primeval watery chaos and brings forth creation in the book of Genesis. Drawing upon spiritual writers like Diarmuid O’Murchu and scientific accounts of cosmogenesis, he argues that this primordial *Rûah Elohim* creates everything, including the Godhead itself, thus bridging the gap between God and the initial Big Bang.¹⁴ This primordial Creative Spirit suffuses all creation, from humans to all life-forms, sustaining it creatively and sacralizing “the cosmic space, the earth-space, the spaces of life-forms and humans.”¹⁵ By connecting the study of the Holy Spirit, or “pneumatology,” with the creation of the world in Genesis, Fung thus is able to conceptually integrate *Rûah Elohim* and nature, arguing that the “spirits of nature” whom indigenous communities revere can be interpreted as participating in the Creative Spirit found in the creation narrative of Genesis. Rather than positing a

that many theologians and religions suffer from a dualism of transcendence and immanence that places the sacred in the former, not the latter (2017, 89).

¹¹ Fung, *A Shamanic Pneumatology in a Mystical Age of Sacred Sustainability*, xxiii.

¹² Fung, *Sacred Sustainability, Polyhedral Christianity and Cosmic Challenges*, 92.

¹³ Fung, *Sacred Sustainability, Polyhedral Christianity and Cosmic Challenges*, 97.

¹⁴ Fung, *Sacred Sustainability, Polyhedral Christianity and Cosmic Challenges*, 88.

¹⁵ Fung, *Sacred Sustainability, Polyhedral Christianity and Cosmic Challenges*, 94.

trade-off or conflict between the Holy Spirit in Christianity and the nature-spirits of indigenous religions, Fung grounds the latter in the former.

Fung's goal is not dissimilar to that of academics in other disciplines working in the "more-than-human" turn. He is clearly also interested in elevating cosmologies that decenter the human. But he arguably goes further in decentering the human than academics outside of theology who work in the "more-than-human" turn. Instead of using the "human" as the primary reference point and talking about going "beyond" or "more than" the human, Fung sidesteps the human altogether and goes straight to Spirit. Quoting Philip Clayton, a philosopher of religion and science, he writes that "spirit now becomes the basic ontological category, that which unites all living things."¹⁶ It all begins with the Creative Spirit, who predates and begets the Godhead, and who suffuses all creation with spirit. This Spirit is separate from "nature" while also permeating it. Fung argues for a creational version of perichoresis—a concept, for those unfamiliar with Christian theology, used to name the mutual interpenetration and mutual indwelling of the three Persons of the Trinity—in which both the Spirit and nature interpenetrate without collapsing into undifferentiated sameness.¹⁷ This way, Fung places humans on an equal plane with other "life-forms." All life forms are the Spirit's creation and are suffused with the Spirit. Spirit is the basic ontological category in which all life-forms participate; it is the main frame of reference, not the human.

To counter the secular humanism of the Anthropocene, Fung calls for a cosmic spirituality that he calls "cosmicism," an emerging pneumatic spirituality that specifically envisions humans as co-creators with *Rûah Elohim*. The task of humans is not simply to "steward" the Earth, but to cultivate and promote increased sensitivity to the sacred Spirit that suffuses the Earth and cosmos, which would lead to a more respectful and reverential relationship with all beings, including those who are part of nature.

What Fung's work makes clear about the academic critique or desire to go beyond the "human" in the social sciences is that such critique is still inevitably tethered to the "human" as the foundational ontological category. This would be unsurprising to Fung, for he argues that the natural and social sciences suffer from an excessive anthropocentrism and have become "addicted and

88. ¹⁶ Fung, *A Shamanic Pneumatology in a Mystical Age of Sacred Sustainability*,

89. ¹⁷ Fung, *Sacred Sustainability, Polyhedral Christianity and Cosmic Challenges*,

enslaved by the subtle influences of positivistic rationalism.”¹⁸ The social sciences are inextricably grounded in a secular humanist perspective. Despite attempts to complicate or exceed it, it is never free from it as the standard point of reference. This does not mean that all anthropologists, historians, or others working in the social sciences are secular themselves, but that our work is premised on a kind of secularism. As Yasmin Moll writes about the anthropologists of Islam: “When we study Islam anthropologically, Islam is not, in that process, our tradition, even when we are Muslim anthropologists.”¹⁹ Her insights apply beyond Islam. Even as anthropologists may be religious, and our work may be inspired by our religious experiences, the academic writing we produce is meant to be persuasive for a non-religious audience. As an anthropologist of religion, I am expected to cite sources seen as canonical within my academic tradition. As a theologian who wants to persuade fellow Christians, Fung has to cite sources that are endowed with at least some authoritative legitimacy within the Christian tradition. Thus while Fung looks beyond the Christian tradition for inspiration, he ultimately grounds his analysis within the tradition. For instance, he spends considerable time pulling quotes from the book of Revelation and the apocryphal books of Jubilees and 1 Enoch which reference “angels of the spirit of fire, of the spirit of the wind, the clouds, darkness, snow and hail, thunder and lightning,” arguing that these “elemental spirits resonate with the indigenous spirit world of nature.”²⁰ He notes how the Bible references angels as spirits or messengers of God, as well as how Paul writes that all things created visible or invisible, “principalities,” “powers,” or “thrones” were “created through Christ and unto Him,” in order to show that *Rûah Elohim* works with councils of angels/spirits to govern humankind and the cosmos.²¹ The “shamanic spirits” of nature and ancestors are also, he argues, messengers similar to angels who mediate between the Great Spirit and humans.

His project is clearly not conducted from a “view-from-nowhere.” He is legitimizing these “shamanic spirits” at least partly through reference to the Christian tradition. His project is not one that treats all traditions with equal epistemic weight; he posits that

¹⁸ Fung, *A Shamanic Pneumatology in a Mystical Age of Sacred Sustainability*, 89.

¹⁹ Yasmin Moll, “Television Is Not Radio: Theologies of Mediation in the Egyptian Islamic Revival,” *Cultural Anthropology* 33, no. 2 (2018): 257, <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca33.2.07>.

²⁰ Fung, *A Shamanic Pneumatology in a Mystical Age of Sacred Sustainability*, 116–17.

²¹ Fung, *A Shamanic Pneumatology in a Mystical Age of Sacred Sustainability*, 116–17.

the Creative Spirit from the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Scriptures is the foundational spirit of all spirits in all traditions. In doing so, he sets up a kind of hierarchy in which the Spirit in the book of Genesis is the foundational Spirit of all, even as he reads this Spirit as universal and beyond Christianity itself. This hierarchy is unsurprising; he is a theologian and frames his work as a work of Christian theology. His starting premises and foundations are clear and explicitly evoked.

Another key difference, then, is that while anthropologists, historians and academics in the social sciences undoubtedly write from a particular (secular) point of view, we are less forthcoming and explicit about it. At best, anthropologists such as Saba Mahmood and Marisol de la Cadena acknowledge the secular premises and assumptions behind their academic translations, while actively laboring to make space for multiple worlds, values and narratives, without hiding their own stances.²² What would it look like if we made clear the premises and assumptions behind our choices, instead of taking secularism as the default, unmarked norm? As anthropologists, we confine our analysis to an analytical *description* of how specific groups work—their claims, practices, and discourses—as part of larger systems. We tend to avoid *normative* or *constructive* claims, especially of the universal variety that theologians do; the only time we may touch on universals is to critique them by pointing out exceptions. But our *descriptions* are necessarily translations, often from specific vernacular names into abstracted categories such as “more-than-human,” which inevitably originate from a particular position—a secular humanist one that itself hails from a Eurocentric tradition. But what is the foundational ontological category, or categories, that our interlocutors use and to whom we have some ethical commitments—and is it really the “human”?

What might it look like if we truly decentered the “anthropos” in “anthropology” and wrote, as Fung did, with a different foundational category?²³ There would not be a dualism between “humans” and “more-than-humans,” but perhaps different varieties of “organism-persons” or “entities” who inhabit the same world and interact with each other in criss-crossing, daily experiences. Our writing might become less authoritative or persuasive to the largely secular discipline of anthropologists as a result, but already scholarship in indigenous studies is pushing forward different modes of narration and types of accountabilities.

²² Marisol de la Cadena, *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds* (Duke University Press, 2015); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Duke University Press, 2005).

²³ Many thanks to the anonymous reviewer for pushing me in this direction.

In 2016, the journal *Progress in Human Geography* published an article, “Co-becoming Bawaka: Towards a relational understanding of place/space,” with Bawaka Country, a land in Australia, as the lead author.²⁴ The article begins, “Come, it’s time to dig for *ganguri* (yams) at Bawaka, our Homeland in northeast Arnhem Land. Will you join us?”.

Anthropology’s Epistemic Contribution to Theology

Let us reverse the conversation: What can anthropology, in particular, bring to the table and illuminate about Fung’s work? Anthropology is a relevant discipline to bring into the conversation with his 2017 book, *A Shamanic Pneumatology*, in particular. The foreword to the book is written by Dr. Kathleen Nadeau, professor emeritus of anthropology at California State University. Three of the seven chapters in the book consist of contextualizing, explaining, and analyzing the indigenous religious practices of the Karen communities, who are located primarily in the town of Dokdaeng in northern Thailand—the stuff of standard ethnographies. Fung, to be clear, did not conduct ethnography in the way that is conventional among anthropologists with long periods of participant observation; he conducted essentially focus groups among 45 Karen respondents, mostly young women, and four traditional shaman leaders.

This difference in method may explain why some critical terms are assumed but not elaborated upon in a way that an anthropologist would most likely have attempted. One of the key words is the word “sacred,” a word that is central to his argument that the Karen practice a kind of “sacred sustainability.” Yet other than a few quick notes that the Karen word for sacred is *cau hsgi*, and that people prefer to speak of it as an adjective rather than a noun (e.g., “sacred place”), it is unclear what *cau hsgi* means and how it differs, if at all, from the conventional definition of the English word “sacred.”²⁵ Fung, for instance, repeatedly mentions that places become sacred *after* humans perform rituals to the spirits of that place or when physical ailments or behaviors occur in a place that cannot be explained by medical science.²⁶ Sacredness is not an unchanging ontological attribute but rather the effect of an action. Does having the status of *cau hsgi* effectively mean that there

²⁴ For example, see Bawaka Country, Sarah Wright, Sandie Suchet-Pearson, et al, “Co-Becoming Bawaka: Towards a Relational Understanding of Place/Space,” *Progress in Human Geography* 40, no. 4 (2016): 455–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132515589437>.

²⁵ Fung, *A Shamanic Pneumatology in a Mystical Age of Sacred Sustainability*, 45.

²⁶ Fung, *A Shamanic Pneumatology in a Mystical Age of Sacred Sustainability*, 46.

are certain regulations and prohibitions that must be observed by humans? For instance, when a spirit possessed a villager and asked for food, the place where the incident took place became known as “sacred” and the villagers were urged to refrain from “desecrating” the area. At the same time, “the sacred is everywhere due to the fact that everything has a spirit,” Fung writes. Is that kind of “sacred” still equivalent to *cau hsgi*? Moreover, it is unclear what the opposite of *cau hsgi* would be. For Fung and many readers in the West, the opposite of “sacred” would be “secular.” But it is unclear what a place would be called *before* it is sacralized and becomes *cau hsgi*.²⁷ Is there even an equivalent of “secular,” and if not, how does that change what *cau hsgi* means? In other words, how much does secularism define Fung’s own definition of sacredness?

Moreover, Fung’s portrayal of Karen relationships with the environment appears to be unconsciously shaped by the interpretive lens of Christian mysticism. He describes how violations due to “impoliteness” or “irreverence” rupture the relationship of humans with the spirits and nature, desacralizing nature and dishonoring ancestors—thus, appropriate ritual offerings must be made. Fung notes that this process can be understood in terms of sinfulness and that the offender’s “attitude and disposition” must be set right in order for reconciliation with nature and ancestral spirits to be attained.²⁸ It is unclear, however, how central “attitude and disposition” is within indigenous Karen religious practices, and whether actions, done correctly, matter more in making things right. Moreover, it is unclear if human attitudes are always the primary cause of offense. For instance, one respondent shared with Fung, “when we walk and fall down in the jungle, we have to think... perhaps our buffalos and pigs have done to offend the spirits. Then we have to kill animals to make offerings to the Spirits.”²⁹ In this case, it was animals who were the potential offenders, and making things right did not mean simply apologizing verbally, but taking concrete action through a blood offering.

In fact, there is evidence to suggest that it is (modern) Christianity that introduces a greater emphasis on feelings and

²⁷ I have similar questions for Fung’s usage of “owner-spirits,” such as the “owner-spirit” of a particular land or body of water. People must ask the owner-spirits before conducting certain activities and apologize to them, for instance, if one pollutes the water. Fung gives us the English translation without the original phrase. I am left wondering how “owner-spirit” here has a different connotation than the typical private property connotations of “owner.”

²⁸ Fung, *A Shamanic Pneumatology in a Mystical Age of Sacred Sustainability*, 86.

²⁹ Fung, *A Shamanic Pneumatology in a Mystical Age of Sacred Sustainability*, 58.

thoughts over action. One Catholic convert opined after adapting a traditional ritual to the Christian way, “We offer everything to God, no sense of worry. God is love. In the ways of the Traditional Religion, it is very strict, so that if the lung of the pig is not good, you have to do it again. We are not under the control of the fear of the Spirit. We feel happy.”³⁰ We see here that conversion to Christianity for him leads to a de-emphasis on correct action and a greater emphasis on feelings. A Protestant pastor clarifies that Protestants can join with fellow villagers in rituals involving asking for blessings for harvests, so long as they do not go “close to the *Ta lue* (*spirit-shrine*) and pray in our heart and mind.”³¹ Conversion has meant for these Protestants that their actions do not matter as much, so long as they pray to the Christian God within their hearts and minds. Christianization has meant a movement away from correct “action” and closer to correct “heart and mind.”³²

It is not to say that attitudes and thoughts do not matter within Karen indigenous religious practices; there is plenty of evidence to suggest that they certainly do, but I am left wondering if they matter as much as Fung suggests. This point came particularly to mind in the last chapter, where Fung walks the reader through an experience he had while meditating in a village house in Dokdaeng. He writes of the “awe,” “calmness of heart,” and “reverence” while having mystical experiences of “one-spirit-ness.”³³ Does Fung run the risk of *unconsciously* assimilating indigenous religious practices into his framework of Christianity? Where Fung excels is where he *consciously* acknowledges differences between Christian theology and Karen indigenous religious practices, but then points out the parallels and paths of convergence, which he does effectively in several places.³⁴

Conclusion

What do we gain from orchestrating this encounter between theology and anthropology in Fung’s recent works? We find that theology can highlight and question the (secular) humanist assumptions of anthropology, assumptions that are usually not

³⁰ Fung, *A Shamanic Pneumatology in a Mystical Age of Sacred Sustainability*, 58.

³¹ Fung, *A Shamanic Pneumatology in a Mystical Age of Sacred Sustainability*, 58.

³² For more on the Protestant emphasis on sincerity, see Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (University of California Press, 2007).

³³ Fung, *A Shamanic Pneumatology in a Mystical Age of Sacred Sustainability*, 147–49.

³⁴ For instance, see his discussion of the differences between *Rāah Elohim* and the Great Spirit of the Karen on pages 115 and 119.

held by our ethnographic interlocutors. Insofar as anthropologists are committed to understanding and narrating the world in the terms of those whom we study, the discipline of anthropology can be productively shaped by theology's provocation in this regard. But I would not go so far as to say that anthropology ought to fully reject its secular, anthropocentric premises. Those premises mean that we tend to ask different questions than practitioners and theologians about spirits and divinities. We do not treat them as equivalent to human actors and ask questions such as, "How do they feel about this? What are they doing?" Rather, we tend to treat these spirits and divinities as illuminative of how a group of humans operates and sees the world. Rather than arguing that one line of inquiry is more complete or accurate than the other, I take the approach of indeterminacy, and view both lines of inquiry as helpful and fruitful, even complementary.³⁵

But even if anthropology is tethered to certain humanist assumptions, it has developed an array of sharp, epistemic tools that prompt ethnographers to question their own assumptions and thus cultivate a kind of epistemic pluralism, even if limited. These tools force anthropologists to ask themselves basic questions such as, "Does that word really mean what I think it means? How much am I reading this phenomenon through the lens of my own experiences, and how do I become conscious of that?" Non-anthropologists would also do well to ask these questions. The tools of anthropology can help theologians realize when, in their study of other religious traditions, they are *unconsciously* interpreting the Other through a Christian lens. My point is not that we should strive to abandon all assumptions and lenses, as it is impossible to have a view from nowhere. Rather, my point is that part of the transformative encounter in reading across disciplines is that we become aware of what our assumptions and lenses are to begin with. Thus, we may sharpen each other, "as iron sharpens iron."³⁶

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³⁵ Paul Nadasdy, "How Many Worlds Are There?: Ontology, Practice, and Indeterminacy," *American Ethnologist* 48, no. 4 (2021): 357–69. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.13046>.

³⁶ Prov 27:17 NRSV

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