

## **AN ASIAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY OF SACRED SUSTAINABILITY**

### **A Local Theology in Dialogue with Indigenous Shamanism**

**Jojo M. Fung<sup>♦</sup>**

The task of doing local theologies in Asia calls for an intercultural-religious dialogue with the hitherto little known and seldom acknowledged traditional religions. The dialogue with shamanic beliefs and practices is indeed a welcome change from the conventional dialogue with the world religions of Asia.

The indigenous peoples are the living cultural symbols of an ancient civilization in our contemporary world. They form a majority of the many poor who subscribe to the many world religions but a substantial number of them still adhere to the primal religions. This ancient civilization is represented by a complex system of beliefs that has been termed as indigenous shamanism in anthropology, primal or traditional religions and indigenous spirituality in theology. Engaging with the ever resilient primal religions as a dialogue partner of theology represents yet another moment of a "bursting in" of a subaltern people in the theological landscape where the timeline has previously been punctuated by the kairological irruption of the poor (Latin America), the people living with HIV/AIDs (Africa), the

---

<sup>♦</sup>**Fr Jojo M. Fung, SJ** hails from Malaysia. He teaches at the Pastoral Institute in the Diocese of Melaka-Johore and at the East Asian Pastoral Theology, Manila. He has published many articles on contextual theology, missiology and social justice. Upcoming book: *An Asian Liberation Theology of Sacred Sustainability: Indigenous Shamanism and Christianity in Dialogue*. He serves as a coordinator of the Jesuit network known as Jesuit Companions in Indigenous Ministry under the aegis of JCAP (Jesuit Conference of Asia Pacific). E-mail: [jojodear@gmail.com](mailto:jojodear@gmail.com)

dalits (South Asia), and women (worldwide) in theology. In this dialogue with the primal religions, the “preferential inclusion” of the shamans, their voices and shamanic beliefs and practices becomes yet another timely and indispensable hermeneutical principle for interpreting the theological significance of the primal religions in theology today.

The methodology commensurate with the format of this article with four significant moments in the theological spiral: (a) lived-experience, (b) critical analysis, (c) discerning theological reflection, (d) pastoral response. Foundational to doing the local theologies of Asia is the centrality of the lived-experience which the first section will highlight in relation to a shamanic ritual of initiation. The lived-experience will expose some of the latent anthropological and theological assumptions in our intra-dialogue between the experience of the religiousness of the indigenous spirituality and the Christian faith. This will be critically challenged and reviewed in the second section. In the third section, the theologizing takes place in a discerning moment of theological reflection that allows the experience to critically correlate with the Traditions of the Church. In the final section, this article will generate some pastoral response in terms of mission-strategies that also articulate a more enriched spirituality of mission.

## **1. Centrality of Initiation in a Lived-Experience**

The lived-experiences in Murutland where the dialogue offers the church of Asia an excellent opportunity to “come and see” and after seeing to take a dip, so that the church learns from being immersed in the traditional religiosity and the scandalous poverty of the subaltern indigenous peoples in the remote villages situated at the borderland. Central to this lived-experience is indeed the experience of initiation and the subsequent reflection that emerges out of this experience.

### **1.1. A Story of the Journey to the Threshold**

This section offers a personal narrative of a theological sojourner like me who is inspired to enter into a dialogue with indigenous shamanism. At the onset, it is important to point out the need for “shamanic realism”<sup>1</sup> which is a *sine non-qua* prerequisite entering into a more intimate experience of shamanism. This realism is the “result of the presence of a system of cultural beliefs whose indelible influence on the author becomes patent in his or her artistic

---

<sup>1</sup>James Alexander Overtone, “Shamanic Realism: Latin American Literature and the Shamanic Perspective,” *SHAMAN*, 6,1 (1998) 25.

representation" in order to understand indigenous shamanism on its own term.<sup>2</sup> Shamanic realism will inform us that the rituals performed by the shamans are not "senseless activity," but ways by which the indigenous shamans "construe and construct their world" as marginal communities.<sup>3</sup>

The sojourn in the Murutland brought a theological sojourner like me to a personal encounter in 1999 with a renowned shaman whom I encountered in an interior Murut village in Southwestern Sabah, East Malaysia, called Pakalungan. He is known as Garing Bin Muntalan. The first meeting ended in futility as he persistently denied having any knowledge of shamanism, only to be redeemed by a second visit. This time, I tendered an apology for my insensitivity in my initial encounter and narrated to him a personal dream in which I saw myself under training in a stream in the absence of a guru. Garing was delighted upon hearing the dream and extended me an invitation to come and stay in his village known as Bantul, at the borderland between Sabah and Kalimantan, Indonesia. This stay led to a further invitation in mid 2001 to be initiated. The initiation finally took place on July 19 and continued on July 20, 2001.<sup>4</sup> During the initiation, Garing narrated to me on July 20, 2001 in a latter conversation at 4pm that the water-spirit was next to him, dictating the incantations to him and he to me which I wrote down as instructed. On July 21, 2001, Garing told me that the water-spirit who is to accompany me as a spirit-guide came to him at midnight (of July 20), woke him up and asked Garing to communicate his name to me.

## 1.2. Preliminary Reflection: Ordinary yet Sacred

(a) *Ordinary yet profound*: The initiation ceremony which took four days was so extraordinarily ordinary: it took place amidst chuckles and awes, among the believing poor and marginalized Muruts. Yet it was as a profound and mystical experience for me.<sup>5</sup> The lived-experience of initiation enabled me to have a glimpse of the pervasive presence of God's splendor as mentioned in the creation account of

---

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 53.

<sup>3</sup>Sue Jennings, *Theatre, Ritual and Transformation*, London & New York: Routledge, 1995, 111-127.

<sup>4</sup>For a detail account of the initiation, see Jojo M. Fung, "Rethinking Missiology In Relation To Indigenous Peoples' Life-struggle," *Mission Studies 20* (2003) 29-54 and *Garing The Legend: A Decorated Hero A Renowned Shaman*, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah: Percetakan Kolombong Ria, 2006.

<sup>5</sup>See Jojo M. Fung, "Toward a Paradigm Shift in Mission amongst the Indigenous Peoples in Asia," FABC Papers No. 105, Hong Kong, Federations of Asian Bishops' Conferences, 2002.

Genesis 1 when God proclaimed creation as good. I gained a new awareness of the sacredness of life in the seen and unseen dimensions. With this awareness comes the added conviction that God as Creator is also the same Creator of the spirit-world. This insight led me to firmly concur with the declaration of Vatican II (AG9; LG17) that there are “elements of truth, of grace and goodness not only in the hearts of people but also in their rites and customs” of Murut shamanism.

(b) *Ritual Initiation into the sacred*: The initiation was more than just the event of crossing a particular threshold in a particular time and space. It is a ritualized initiation that resembles an initiation into the deep sacred mysteries of life. In this experience of awe in the presence of the water-spirits during the initiation, there is an evoked mystical sense of God’s sacred presence.

This initiation-experience left me with a lingering sense of the sacred mysteries of life, a sacredness that is all pervasive and comprehensive. All of life, in both the seen and unseen multiple worlds, is sacred. The sacredness of life makes possible the interconnectedness between the multiple worlds. The sacredness of the unseen world impinges on the seen world of the fishes, rivers, animals, jungle produce, forests, land and humankind. This sacredness governs the inter-relationship of the multiple worlds and regulates the access to the other worlds for the needs of the human world. Excessive exploitation based on lust and greed must cease in order to avoid any rupture and disharmony in the visible world and between the different worlds.

The lived-experience of initiation is best described as an “*epiphanic moment*” that opened up a new vista of theological understanding of the sacredness of the deep mysteries of life.

## **2. Critical Analysis of Latent Assumptions**

This dialogic process, right up till the initiation, was marked by recurrent moments of uncertainty which are related to deep-seated latent presuppositions that are indelibly imprinted in the sub(un)conscious. Easily identifiable are fear of the unknown and fear of evil-spirit possession. In critically analyzing the root-causes of fear, what becomes apparent is its root in the knowledge acquired in the days of catechism classes, houses of formation and pastoral involvement. These stories abound in Asia and they usually associated shamanism with idolatry and satanic practices. Their practitioners are ridiculed as dubious magicians, witches, healers and

exorcists whose practices are allegedly motivated by profits.<sup>6</sup> A typical illustration is the use of the word “jinx” to describe the water-spirits which immediately conjures up unsightly images of the devil and Satan, associated with sharings about being possessed by evil spirits during visits to the temples of the religious other, including the gospel stories of the possessed delivered by Jesus (Mt 8:28-34, Lk 8:26-29, Mk 5:1-20).

These latent epistemological presuppositions have their source in the medieval European theology and anthropology of the sixteenth century during the Renaissance when Christianity “came between the European and the non-European Other.”<sup>7</sup> The prevalent lens to view the cultural other was demonology which was related to the Fall, the influence of Sin and Satan. Then came the age of Enlightenment in which the “psychology of error and superstition” founded on ignorance became the lens to describe the cultures and religions of Asia, Africa and Latin America as “forms of untruths and unenlightenment” in relation to a Europe that was civilized and enlightened.<sup>8</sup>

Again In the nineteenth century, “it was ... evolutionary time” by which anthropology contrasted the Europeans and the cultural other on a time-line between the past and present.<sup>9</sup> The lens for perception was that the rest of the world possessed by demons, lived in error and superstition, and therefore uncivilized, inferior and primitive. Riding on the back of this ideology was “the missionary methods with which Christianity spread in the wake of colonialism and imperialism” and these methods “were not concerned to recognize other cultures and religions” on their own terms, but “on the contrary, convinced that they knew true humanity and were in full possession of the truth, Western Churches and theologians were not afraid of annihilating other cultures by force and demonizing alien systems of religion.”<sup>10</sup>

This critical analysis in doing local theology is important to unmask the ethnocentricity and pave the way for a proper understanding of

---

<sup>6</sup>For more details, see *The Spirit at Work in Asia Today, FABC Papers* 81, Hong Kong: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, 1998.

<sup>7</sup>Bernard McGrane, *Beyond Anthropology: Society and the Other*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, ix.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 77.

<sup>10</sup>Giancarlo Collet, “From Theological Vandalism to Theological Romanticism? Questions about a Multicultural Identity of Christianity?” *Concilium* 2 (1994) 31.

the cultural matrix of indigenous shamanism which becomes the crucible for generating a new theological discourse that honors what is noble and true in indigenous cultures and beliefs.

### 3. Articulating a Liberation Theology of Sacred Sustainability

The discerning moment of theological reflection takes place as an intrapersonal dialogue wherein the lived-experience, the preliminary insights and relevant questions are brought into a hermeneutical arena and interface with the Sacred Scripture and the Teachings of the Church. What has Scripture to say about the spirit-world and the ritual artifacts? In what way does indigenous spirituality brings about the liberation of the marginal indigenous communities from scandalous poverty and the enslaving hegemonic logic of capitalism? Does the indigenous logic on the sacred provide a liberative model on sustainability to a world plagued by climate change, and an insatiable lust for profit through the commoditization of all resources?

#### 3.1. Difference and Affinity

The biblical understanding of idols differs from the general misperception and equation of indigenous shamanism with idolatry and their adherents as idolaters. The term *idol* basically means “representations but which had acquired pejorative connotations in the preaching of the prophets for whom “idols” were false gods.”<sup>11</sup> Idolatry refers to practices resorting to power that “are not personified but best understood in terms of an inner “force, an urge to act that comes upon one as though from outside,” like an impulse.”<sup>12</sup> Hence, human wickedness is understood biblically as the “spirit of harlotry” (Hos 4:10-5:7) which “brings on (Hebr “seduces to”) these aberrations”<sup>13</sup> such as licentiousness, injustices, insincere worship, violation of the human rights and dignity, legitimizing royal rule with elaborate building projects, justified by any form of violence and bloodshed. In other words, idolatry is of human origin, arising from the evil inclinations and desires in the wicked hearts of human beings. In this sense, the spirits are not false gods and the ritual practices, idolatry.

---

<sup>11</sup>Raymond F. Collins, “The First Letter to the Thessalonians,” in *The New Jerusalem Biblical Commentary*, Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy, ed., London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993, 775.

<sup>12</sup>Dennis J. McCarthy and Roland E. Murphy, “Hosea,” in *The New Jerusalem Biblical Commentary*, 222.

<sup>13</sup>Dennis J. McCarthy and Roland E. Murphy, “Hosea,” 222.

The hand-made statutes and artifacts used in rituals are earthly representations of the gods in whose likeness these figurines were fashioned. Gay Robins, a scholar of ancient cult objects, postulates that the statutes are valid ways of worship in the ancient Near East by which the worshipers interact with their gods to “persuade them to create, renew, and maintain the universe” through ritual performances.<sup>14</sup> The presence of these gods in the physical statues does not in any way limit them in time and space as these gods are spirits. As spiritual realities, these gods could manifest in different ways, in all locations, even all at one time. In fact, the writer of Deuteronomy did not consider these gods “only as humanly fabricated idols.”<sup>15</sup>

These gods are spirits and they in no way must be equated with the demons (Deut 32:17) or the spirits from Sheol (including the human dead; 1 Sam 28:13). The spirits are sources of supernatural power, comparable to the angels of Yahweh (Hos 12:4-5 [Hebrew text] and Gen 28:12; 32:1-2 in relation to 35:1-7) akin to the ancestral gods or a host of deities whose “proper “habitation” was considered the “spirit world” and whose primary existence was a disembodied one.”<sup>16</sup> The power of these spirits is supernatural which only the experienced shamans can gain access to on behalf of the community through rituals. This power is from the “spirit world,” the invisible realm beyond our visible world, the “cosmos beyond.”

The benevolent spirits find an affinity in the *ruah* of the uncreated Creator which Genesis (1:1-2) depicted as sweeping over the waters. *Ruah* is a Hebrew word meaning “air in motion” which conveys connotations of “wind,” “breathe,” and “spirit.”<sup>17</sup> If God is *ruah*, then the shamanic spirits can be seen as part of this primal creative *ruah*, since these spirits are called upon by reputable shamans to bring about healing of human ailments and relational disharmony and cosmic rupture. In this sense, these somatic and cosmic-liberating spirits share in the sacred power of God’s creative *ruah*. Consequently the actions of the spirits can be construed as continuing the creative and salvific works of God in all of creation.

In this sense, it is safe to state that just as God fashion the earth out of a formless void, the shamanic spirits assist God in fashioning

---

<sup>14</sup>Michael S. Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism?” *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, 18 (2008) 8

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 22-23.

<sup>16</sup>See footnote 63 in Michael S. Heiser, 30.

<sup>17</sup>Richard J. Clifford, and Roland E. Murphy, “Genesis.” In *The New Jerusalem Biblical Commentary*, 10.

humankind and the earth, impacted by diseases, conflicts, marginalization, violence and the current ecological crises. In the understanding that Yahweh is the “God of the gods” (Deut 10:17), enthroned over the chaotic waters while the minor gods sing praises to Yahweh (Ps 29:1),<sup>18</sup> Yahweh is indeed the Supreme Spirit who sit in divine council (Ps 82:1; cf. Deut 4:19; Ps 95:3; cf. I Kgs 22:19-22; Isa 6; Job 1-2) with the other spirits. More so, if the other gods are spirits who sit in the assembly presided over by Yahweh,<sup>19</sup> then by participation in the primal *Ruah*, the soma-cosmic-liberating spirits can be construed as the gods of primal religions who sit among the other gods of the world religions, in the divine assembly with Yahweh, presiding over the recreation-salvation of the world.

### 3.2. Liberating Power from “Beyond” and “Within”

The seed of the liberating power for a contextual liberation theology of Asia is found in the liberating spirituality of the primal religions of the indigenous peoples, as attested to by the Karen narrative.

The Absolute Being, or “the creator, is known to the Karen Hill tribes of Northern Chiangmai as *Ta Thi Ta Tau* who is the owner of the mountains, the rivers, and the trees. In 1985, confronted with the imminent destruction of their watershed area due to mining, the Karens of the Maelid Village and neighboring villages invoked the Absolute Being through a ritual to support their struggle after the negotiations with the mining company failed.

The rituals enabled the people to gain access to *Ta Thi Ta Tau* and made the power “beyond” immanent. Even though the negotiation with the mining company has reached a stalemate, the rituals has given the Karen of the 10 villagers an experience of a “power within,” derived from the power beyond to negotiate the contestations and conflicts they encountered. In 1987, the extractive industry ceased its operation due to heavy losses, ranging from some workers becoming sick, others killed in a landslide and the unexplainable disappearance of the minerals. The villagers attributed the disappearance of the minerals to the power of the Absolute Being.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup>K.L. Noll, “Canaanite Religion” © Blackwell Publishing 2006 *Religion Compass* 1/1 (2007) 66, 10.1111/j.1749-8171.2006.00010.x

<sup>19</sup>Kselman, John S., and Michael L. Barre. 1993. “Psalms” in *The New Jerusalem Biblical Commentary*, 540.

<sup>20</sup>Sunthorn Wongjomporn, “Re-creating Sacred Space through the Water Spirit Ritual: A Model for Sustainable Development in DokDaeng Village, Chiangmai, Thailand.” Ph. D Dissertation, Asian Social Institute, 2008.



Amongst the Lahu Nyi shamanism of Northern Chiangmai is a ritual in which they have a performative utterance known as “*Kusha-yalo-wei*” which explains that “God has come down.” This denotes the descent of the power from on high amongst the people who invoked on the Creator or God.<sup>21</sup> It is through such belief and ritual-invocation that the indigenous villagers gained access to the “power beyond” so that God’s power descends on the community. This power descends on the people, empowers them in their struggle, so that a “power beyond” become a “power within” that translates into a “power over” the mining company and the villagers prevented the destruction of their watershed area, a forestland which is so vital for a more sustainable livelihood in the rural villages.

### 3.3. Theologizing on Sacred Sustainability

This is a local theology that involves a process of theologizing on a context-specific dialogue of indigenous shamanism with Christianity. This process calls for critically correlating the intra-dialogic experiences with the extra-dialogic reflection in the light of the Christian faith. The effort on theologizing is premised on two shamanic beliefs: (i) the indwelling spirits that made all things sacred and (ii) the power of a Creator-God who descends upon the people who cry out for divine intervention in the struggle for a more sustainable livelihood.

The shamanic belief in the Creator of the *cosmos* articulates with the God, the uncreated Creator of Genesis (1:1-2) depicted as the *ruah* sweeping over the waters and transforming it into a *cosmos* that befits all human and bio-species on earth. This is the Creator-God whom the author of Genesis (1:1-2:3) affirms as pronouncing the *cosmos* as suffused with God’s goodness. (Gen1:4,10,12,18,21,25,31) This narrative is the basis of a theological discourse on how God made sacred, a divine “*saralization*” of the *cosmos* and *anthropos* that constitutes a fundamental presupposition that the *cosmos* and *anthropos* are the sacred dwelling place of God. Any violation of a *cosmos* and *anthropos* made sacred is sufficient ground for the Creator-God to act on behalf of the violated, be it the Israelites who were oppressed in Egypt (through Moses and Joshua) or the Davidic monarchy who have violated fellow Israelites and their neighbors (through the judges and the prophets) out of human wickedness as a

---

<sup>21</sup>Conversation in a Lahu Village situated an hour from Chaingmai City, on September 15, 2010 with Fr. Niphot Thievihan, director of the Research and Training Religio-Cultural Community Center, Chiangmai.

result of disloyalty to Yahweh and the covenant and the addiction to the idols of lust, wealth and power.

The Creator-Liberator God has made a covenant with the *cosmos* and the *anthropos* (Gen 9:8-17, 9:9-17, 17:1-22). By the act of creation and through the covenant, God has endowed the *cosmos* with an inherent organic value and the *anthropos* with inviolable dignity and inalienable rights to be respected, and the existence of both to be sustained with dignity and reverence. Rendering the utmost respect to the inviolable sacredness of the *cosmos* and the *anthropos* demands that the sacred *cosmos* and the *anthropos* be liberated from all forms of violence and rid of all addiction and idolatry that desecrate God's creation. The covenantal sacralization of the *cosmos and anthropos* that urges the fundamental respect for the sacredness of the *cosmos* and the *anthropos* is a foundational presupposition of a liberation theology of sacred sustainability. Without this theological presupposition, the realization of sustainability of life on earth is elusive and untenable.

The shamanic invocation of "*Kusha-yalo-wei*" resonates with the Creator-God who is incarnated as *Immanuel*. (Mt 1:23; 1 Cor 14:25) The *Kusha* who descends upon the people, hearing their cries for justice and sustainable livelihood, finds an echo in the God-is-with-us in the person Jesus who fulfills his Kingdom-ministry (Luke 4:19) through the liberation of the marginalized in early Palestine. God's creative *ruah* is now the indwelling *ruah* that is the creative-salvific power within Jesus, guiding his ministry of Kingdom-liberation for all who are in need of God and God's salvific liberation. Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God and demonstrated by word and deeds that the Kingdom is at hand (Mk 1:15), through the liberation of persons, suffering from bodily ailments and poverty, violated and desecrated by the oppressive system of taxation of the Jewish Temple-State and the Roman Empire.<sup>22</sup> The healing and deliverance of Jesus are manifestations of the supernatural power of the God-with-and-within-us who set free the human spirit and bodies from all violence, be it physical and/or structural.

---

<sup>22</sup>For more details, see Peter Garney & Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society and Culture*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987; Richard A. Horsley, *Sociology and the Jesus Movement*, New York: Crossroad Company, 1989; Gerard Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, trans. John Bowden, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978. For a more feminine critique, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "'You are not to be Called Father': Early Christian History in a Feminist Perspective," in *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-of Liberation*, New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994.

In his ministry in early Palestine, Jesus pronounced the marginalized as heirs of Abraham (Mt 8:29; Lk13:16) because of their inviolable dignity as persons made sacred in God's image and likeness (Gen 1:26). Through his Kingdom-ministry, Jesus defended their inviolable rights to be revered as sacred, not to be violated by any cultural, religious, political or invisible powers. The Christ-event definitively seals God's everlasting covenant (Mk 14:24; Mt 26:28; Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25) with creation and the outpouring of God's Spirit (Acts 2) is the definitive assurance of God's everlasting and recurrent sacralization of the *cosmos* and *anthropos*. This is the Christological basis of an Asian liberation theology of sacred sustainability.

In the Risen Lord, the *ruah-made-flesh* in the God-in-person, is now universalized and the omnipresent Pentecostal Spirit breaks forth from a single to a multi-religio-cultural manifestation and presence in many regions through the early missionary church, already alluded to in the multi-glossarial phenomenon (Acts 2: 1-13). The indwelling Spirit acts as the dynamic power within the apostles and disciples (Luke 3:22; 4:1, 18; 10:21; Acts 1:2) that continue Jesus' Kingdom-ministry of liberating peoples from the imperial forces in the Graeco-Roman world that continue to violate the sacredness and dignity of the human persons and God's creation.<sup>23</sup>

As the earlier postulation (see 3.1) stated that the shamanic spirits are participating in the primal *ruah*, then the indwelling spirits also participate in the omnipresent Pentecostal Spirit of the Risen Lord as soma-cosmic liberating spirits. Their indwelling as the spirits of the mountains, rivers, animals, water-source and forests only suffused nature with a cosmological or eco-sacredness which further reinforces the organic value that God has endowed creation by virtue of being created sacred in God's sight. This value of sacredness commands our human reverence and resolve to resort to a sustainable use of the earth's resources as responsible stewards of the earth. The outpouring of God's Spirit and the indwelling spirits in nature that renders creation sacred lays the pneumatological foundation of an Asian liberation of sacred sustainability.

This process of theologizing lends itself to an articulation of an Asian liberation theology of sacred sustainability.

---

<sup>23</sup>See Richard J. Dillon, "Acts of the Apostles," in *The New Jerusalem Biblical Commentary*, 731 and William S. Kurz, "The Acts of the Apostles," in Dianne Bergant and Robert J. Karris, Eds., *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1988, 1039.

### 3.4. An Asian Liberation Theology of Sacred Sustainability

This Asian liberation theology promotes the notion of sacred<sup>24</sup> sustainability which postulates that the indwelling of God's Spirit and the shamanic spirits in the multiple forms of life makes life and creation sacred. Sacred sustainability is a notion that postulates that life on earth is only sustainable when we behold persons as sacred and respect space and beings as sacred, be they the forestland and biospecies. As such the discourse on sacred sustainability goes beyond the premodern notion of a hierarchical structured sacred order<sup>25</sup> or the "sustainable development" proposed by the Brundtland Commission of the United Nations that includes environmental, social and economic – the "three pillars" of sustainability.<sup>26</sup>

This liberation-theological discourse on sacred sustainability is uniquely Asian in that it is not just liberation from structures but a liberation that involves gaining access to the shamanic spirits, the liberating power from the "cosmos beyond" to become the "power within" those who engaged in the struggle for sustainable livelihood and dignity. It means mediating the power of the spirits who participated in God's creative *ruah* and unleashing the power latent in the spirituality of the marginalized of the many world and primal religions of Asia. At the same time, it is about walking the God-Talk because it is a discourse about a God-in-action in the ongoing struggle of the marginalized, liberating them and the world from the idolatry of profit, pleasure and power as inherent in the logic of global capitalism.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup>Interesting, the epistemological root of Sacred is *sacrum* in Latin which refers to the gods and in this article, sacred rightly refers to the indwelling spirits that makes all beings and space sacred.

<sup>25</sup>See Tony Neelankavil, "The Priesthood and the Challenges of Secularization and Post- modernity," *Vidyjyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 74 (2010) 85.

<sup>26</sup>United Nations General Assembly (1987) *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future*. Transmitted to the General Assembly as an Annex to document A/42/427 - Development and International Co-operation: Environment. Retrieved on: 2009-02-15. For information on Brundtland Commission see online: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainability> accessed on Nov 25, 2009.

<sup>27</sup>For more information on Asian Liberation theology, see Aloysius Pieris, especially the section "The Way Toward Ecclesiological Revolution: The double Baptism in Asian Religion and Poverty" in his article "Asia's Non-Semetic Religions and the Mission of the Local Churches," in *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, New York: Orbis Books, 1992, 45-50.

This liberation-theological discourse on sacred sustainability calls for the promotion of a sustainable relationship of space and beings because they are all sacred. The space in discussion is inclusive of the space within the human body or “body-space” and space as the entire earth or earth-space, even outer space as in the entire universe. If space is sacred, then the human body, the earth and the universe are all sacred. Similarly the beings in deliberation refer to all organic and non-organic things on earth. Any violation of spaces and beings on the earth, defies the notion of sacred sustainability and life on earth and human livelihood can no longer be sustainable.

This discourse on an Asian liberation theology of sacred sustainability deems the current global system as unsustainable for reasons that this system operates on a consumeristic logic that “nothing stands in the way of converting the rest of the earth – the “undeveloped world into resources and markets.”<sup>28</sup> The admission of Adam Smith, “[All] for ourselves and nothing for other people, seems, in every age of the world, to have been the vile maxim of the masters of mankind”<sup>29</sup> clearly spells out the tragedy in the incessant desacralization of creation and the profit-oriented commoditification of the earth’s resources. This logic hollows out God’s creation of its organic value and empties creation of an inviolable sacredness. Contrary to the rationale of the capitalistic logic, this discourse advocates that “in nature, the believer recognizes the wonderful result of God’s creative activity,”<sup>30</sup> and the earth’s resources are “a common good, destined for all”<sup>31</sup> and therefore “the goods of the earth were created by God to be used wisely by all... shared equitably, in accordance with justice and charity,”<sup>32</sup> “while respecting the intrinsic balance of creation.”<sup>33</sup>

#### 4. Ecclesial Responses

As a praxis-oriented theological discourse, this germinal Asian liberation theology of sacred sustainability calls for certain ecclesial responses. Suffice to enumerate a few for immediate and future responses for consideration and implementation.

---

<sup>28</sup>See David R. Loy, “Pave the Planet or Wear Shoes? A Buddhist Perspective on Greed and Globalization,” in Paul Knitter and Chandra Muzaffar, ed., *Subverting Greed: Religious Perspective on the Global Economy*, New York: Orbis Books, 2002, 72-73.

<sup>29</sup>See Adam Smith, book III, 1981, 336, quoted in Ameer Ali, “Globalization and Greed: A Muslim Perspective,” in Paul Knitter and Chandra Muzaffar, 142.

<sup>30</sup>See Compendium of the Catholic Social Doctrine, no. 466.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., no. 270.

<sup>33</sup>See Benedict XVI’s Papal Encyclical, *Caritas in veritate*, no. 48.

- a. Retrieve the notion of the sacred and generate a multi-disciplinary discourse on sacred sustainability at all levels of the life of the church and society;
- b. Pronounce the primal religions as part of God's salvific plan and elevate indigenous shamanism to the status of a dialogue partner of theology, with a comparable status as the world religions so that the Church of Asia truly becomes enriched by the primal religions through mutual enrichment and critique;
- c. Allow ourselves to be evangelized by the renowned and reputable shamans so as to learn from them how to become the living and effective symbols of sacred sustainability;
- d. Collaborate with the reputable shamans and all other prophetic figures in the different traditions to denounce any blatant violation of the ancestral homeland of the indigenous and their communal rights to sustainable livelihood in incidences without any prior consultation and due compensation;
- e. Collaborate with the reputable shamans in denouncing all forms of idolatrous addiction to seductive and destructive power, prestige and pleasure of global capitalism that violates and desecrates persons, the indigenous homeland and God's creation;
- f. Lend the institutional support of the church to the efforts of the shamans to recreate sacred space so as to maneuver and negotiate the onslaught of global capitalism that contest the status of their ancestral homeland and threaten their intergenerational livelihood and dignity;
- g. Select a day in our liturgical calendar to celebrate World Sacred Day (much akin to the Earth Day) to deepen the awareness that sacred sustainability is essential to a sustainable life on earth so that we learn to behold all of creation, all bio-species and humankind, as sacred in God's sight.

## **Conclusion**

A local theology of Asia that generates a discourse on sacred sustainability is the outcome of a dialogue with indigenous shamanism. This requires a lived-experience in which the invitation to undergo an initiation rite is central to this dialogue. It is out of this initiation-experience that the latent assumptions are identified and subjected to critical analysis which exposes an antiquated anthropological and theological ethnocentricity that dates back to medieval Europe. The discerning process of theological reflection assures us that the shamanic spirits are participating of God's creative

*ruah* and these spirits are the gods of the primal religions sitting in the divine council of Yahweh with the other gods of the world religions. These indwelling spirits in nature and in human beings alert us that all of God's creation is sacred as the *cosmos* and *anthropos* are suffused with divine goodness. Creation made sacred by God has an inherent organic value and humankind, created in God's image, has an inviolable dignity that is sacred.

This Asian liberation theology of sacred sustainability is a "God-talk" that takes up the cries of violated indigenous communities and listens with a discerning heart to the voice of God in the voices of the shamans who shares in the struggle of the indigenous peoples. From a "God-Talk" this theology advocates a discourse in action or a "God-walk" so that the discourse on sacred sustainability becomes a liberation theology for a world subjected to a capitalist logic premised on the desacralization and monetization of the world and all its resources. Life under global capitalism in our world is no longer sustainable when the sacred dwelling place of God in all space and beings on earth become desecrated by the greed and violence of global market capitalism. The theology of sacred sustainability which calls for reverence for the *cosmos* and *anthropos* as the sacred abode of God provides a viable way forward for the sustainability of God's creation in the future.