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# Contemporary Shamanism and Alternative Spirituality: Exploring Relationships and Intersections

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Contemporary shamanism (also called “neo-shamanism”)<sup>1</sup> is a popular spiritual practice, often classified within the expanding field of alternative spirituality, which was also previously labelled as “New Age”, “New Age spirituality”, or “cultic milieu”.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary shamanism firmly reflects the virtues of Western society in which it is rooted, which emphasise authenticity, individuality, democratisation, and the freedom to choose one’s identity, spirituality included.<sup>3</sup>

When analysing contemporary shamanism, many scholars have tended to describe it either as (1) an appropriated (stolen) and misinterpreted indigenous spirituality that Westerners, in their desperate attempt to live a meaningful life, have usurped and mindlessly consumed; (2) an altogether natural and integral part of Western culture or alternative spirituality, as one option among many; or (3) a phenomenon that exists in a peculiar, juxtapositional relationship to alternative spirituality, such as paganism.<sup>4</sup>

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- 1 I have decided to avoid this term in this article out of respect for its practitioners, who often understand the term in a pejorative sense, because they feel it implies that their spirituality is inauthentic.
- 2 For a thorough overview, see Zuzana Kosticová, “Religion, Spirituality, Worldviews, Discourses: Revisiting the Term ‘Spirituality’ as Opposed to ‘Religion’”, *Central European Journal of Contemporary Religion* 4/2, 2018, 81-97.
- 3 Francois Gauthier, “Why All These ‘Neos’? Why Now?: The Structural Conditions of ‘New Age Spiritualities’ in the Global-Market Era, as Seen from Latin America”, *Ciencias Sociales y Religion/Ciencias Sociais e Religiao* 23, 2021, 1-42.
- 4 These three approaches are represented, for example, by the following three authors: Alice Beck Kehoe, *Shamans and Religion: An Anthropological Exploration in Critical Thinking*, Long Grove: Waveland Press 2000; Thomas A. DuBois, *An Introduction to Shamanism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009; Robert J. Wallis, *Shamans/Neo-Shamans: Ecstasy, Alternative Archaeologies, and Contemporary Pagans*, London: Routledge 2003.



However, it seems to me that all of these three perspectives fail to provide a full and accurate taxonomy of contemporary shamanism.

This article thus seeks to elaborate the relationship between contemporary shamanism and alternative spirituality in more depth. The aim of this discussion is to demonstrate that contemporary shamanism operates much like other shamanic traditions around the world. I will argue that contemporary shamanism is not an independent or borrowed (stolen) religious system, but rather a specific configuration within a shared religious space. The milieu of worldviews in which contemporary shamanism operates can in turn be recognised as alternative spirituality.

Understanding shamanism as a relevant spiritual phenomenon interwoven in the worldviews of alternative spirituality can allow us to gain a better grasp of the context of its occurrence and a better understanding of its enduring popularity in the Western world. The hypothesis introduced in this article offers a more complex and culturally sensitive approach to examining contemporary shamanic practices than the abovementioned classifications. Furthermore, this classification supports the credibility of modern shamanic practices, avoiding both contempt and glorification, and allows us to understand better the unifying motifs that contemporary shamanism has adopted, regardless of the original traditions which it draws from, while also distinguishing its own contours against the backdrop of alternative spirituality.

The first section of the article will focus on contemporary shamanism, showing how the popular perception of the shaman originated and has solidified over time. A pivotal source of inspiration for the current conceptualisation of the shaman can be traced to the legacy of Michael Harner and his essential contributions to shaping contemporary shamanism.<sup>5</sup> It is obvious that his influence has left an indelible mark on almost every form of contemporary shamanism.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, when referring to contemporary shamanism throughout this discussion, it will most likely encompass some variation of Harnerian or Harnerianish shamanism.

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5 Michael J. Harner, *The Way of the Shaman: A Guide to Power and Healing*, New York (NY): Harper and Row 1980; Andrei A. Znamenski, *The Beauty of the Primitive: Shamanism and the Western Imagination*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007.

6 See, for example, Lewis, who convincingly claims that his “Foundation for Shamanic Studies” (FSS) is widely accepted as “traditional” shamanism among Sami shamans and their sympathizers; see James R. Lewis, “New Age Medicine Men versus New Age Noaidi: Same Neoshamanism, Different Sociopolitical Situation”, in: Siv Ellen Kraft – Trude Fonneland – James R. Lewis (eds.), *Nordic Neoshamanisms* (Palgrave Studies in New Religions and Alternative Spiritualities), New York (NY): Palgrave Macmillan 2015, 127-140.

The second section will delve into the shared worldviews of shamanism and alternative spirituality. Here, it is worth highlighting that alternative spirituality has transcended its former status as an epistemological black-hole. Recent research suggests that alternative spirituality is far from an inconsistent package of spiritual doctrines and techniques, and is instead much more elaborate and cohesive than previously assumed, as it shares common beliefs, accepted ritual techniques, spiritual leaders, and respected institutions. Alternative spirituality is increasingly recognised as a new religion of today's era.<sup>7</sup>

However, alternative spirituality lacks overarching institutions or canonical literature for two reasons: first, it is still a relatively young movement, and, second, adherents of alternative spirituality strongly resist any kind of institutionalisation.<sup>8</sup> They place greater value on spiritual experiences, distancing themselves from traditional "churches," which they perceive as dogmatic, institutionalised, and hierarchical.<sup>9</sup> Adopting an authoritative framework would put alternative spirituality, at least nominally, in the same position as the Christianity it criticises. Although a definitive definition of the worldview of alternative spirituality has not yet been formulated, the research community has been able to identify its core worldviews and key symbols accurately and reliably for some time.

After this discussion, I will proceed to present the premises of the worldview of alternative spirituality, focusing specifically on the concepts of energy, soul, and holism, as outlined by the two leading scholars in the field of alternative spirituality, Wouter Hanegraaff and Paul Heelas. Then, I'll compare these premises with the findings of my extensive long-term research within the contemporary shamanic community in the Czech Republic. This research was conducted from 2017 to 2020 and utilized qualitative research methods, notably participant observation, to explore various shamanic sessions. In addition, approximately 20 in-depth interviews were undertaken with shamans and their adherents and clients.

In the final part of the article, I will demonstrate that contemporary shamanism, as defined from the perspectives of scholars such as Åke

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7 Jan Kapusta – Zuzana Kostíćová, "From the Trees to the Wood: Alternative Spirituality as an Emergent 'Official Religion'?", *Journal of Religion in Europe* 13/3-4, 2020, 187-213.

8 For a more thorough discussion of the vernacularity of alternative spirituality, see Steven Sutcliffe – Marion Bowman, "Introduction", in: Steven Sutcliffe – Marion Bowman (eds.), *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2000, 1-16.

9 Boaz Huss, "The Sacred is the Profane, Spirituality is not Religion: The Decline of the Religion/Secular Divide and the Emergence of the Critical Discourse on Religion", *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 27/2, 2015, 97-103.

Hultkrantz and Lars Pharo, follows a pattern analogous to that of native and traditional shamanisms. These shamanic traditions have been shown to be deeply embedded in their sociocultural and religious contexts and the same applies to contemporary shamanism. It does not exist in a vacuum; rather, it constitutes a configuration within the religious and cultural system recognized as alternative spirituality.

### 1. A Shamanic discursive journey from Siberia to Core shamanism

Before I proceed to compare the relationship between contemporary shamanism and alternative spirituality, it is necessary to explain how it has become that, in the alternative spirituality community, the shaman is primarily perceived as a (wounded) healer, a psychopomp, a mentor, or a therapist. What has happened to their divinatory abilities, their magical protection from evil forces, their ability to cause harm to adversaries or neighbouring communities, as well as their ambivalent reception by the mainstream society, as we know from anthropological reports?<sup>10</sup>

Over the last three centuries, the perception of shamans has changed dramatically. The first European references to Siberian shamans, which date to the late 17<sup>th</sup> century and in the Enlightenment period, portray shamans with both fascination and disdain, labelling them as madmen or tricksters who deluded the common folk. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many other armchair anthropologists interpreted the previously collected attractive material on “savage” states of possession and medicalised shamans as reports of epileptics or “disturbed” individuals influenced by adverse environmental conditions (known as “Arctic hysteria”).<sup>11</sup>

The first signs of a discursive shift emerged within the literary and cultural movement of Romanticism, where the image of the shaman acquired the attributes of an exceptional and gifted personality, a visionary who lived in intimate and unspoiled contact with nature. The complete rehabilitation of the western image of the shaman was achieved only in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

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10 The historical transformation of discourses was discussed in detail, e.g. A. A. Znamenski, *The Beauty of the Primitive...*; Ronald Hutton, *Shamans: Siberian Spirituality and the Western Imagination*, London: Hambledon Continuum 2007; Jeroen W. Boekhoven, *Genealogies of Shamanism: Struggles for Power, Charisma and Authority*, Groningen: Barkhuis 2011; or Kocku von Stuckrad, *Schamanismus und Esoterik: Kultur- und wissenschaftliche Betrachtungen*, Leuven: Peeters 2003.

11 Maria Antonina Czapliczka's *Aboriginal Siberia: A Study in Social Anthropology*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1914, is one of the most famous books in which this point of view is presented.

In the 1940s, the anthropologist and father of structuralism, Claude Lévi-Strauss, reshaped the concept of the shaman as a healer and a master of symbolic reinterpretation who served their society.<sup>12</sup> Thanks to Lévi-Strauss' work, shamans began to be understood not as psychotics performing their illness but primarily as healers. This idea strongly persists to this day, as is seen in the work of shamans like Joan Halifax.<sup>13</sup>

Alongside these “native” shamanic practices, which anthropologists have studied through the analysis of recorded material and through focused local field research, there is also a form of shamanism found in Western Euro-American society, commonly referred to as neo-shamanism in the scholarly literature. This contemporary shamanism, which constitutes the main subject of this article, originated from the romanticised ideal of the “noble savage” and gained popularity through the works of three widely recognised authors in shamanic studies, namely: Mircea Eliade with his groundbreaking monograph *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*,<sup>14</sup> Carlos Castaneda with his book series on the teachings of Don Juan,<sup>15</sup> and Michael Harner with his depiction of shamanism in the book *The Way of the Shaman*.<sup>16</sup>

The significance of Mircea Eliade's work lies in how it has solidified the image of the shaman in the mainstream perception. He evocatively portrayed shamans as ancient wisdom keepers and gatekeepers of “the Sacred”.<sup>17</sup> Eliade systematized shamanic cosmology and defined shamanism as the archaic technique of ecstasy. His work sparked a pop-cultural interest in shamanism, leading to its practical restoration three decades later in contemporary shamanism.

Carlos Castaneda influenced contemporary shamanism by promoting a new and very popular genre of shamanic literature.<sup>18</sup> Although his influential book series on the native shaman Don Juan Matus was later de-

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12 Chapters “The Sorcerer and His Magic” and “The Effectiveness of Symbols”, in: Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, New York (NY): Basic Books 1963.

13 Joan Halifax, *Shaman: The Wounded Healer*, New York (NY): Crossroad 1982.

14 Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press 1972.

15 Starting in 1968 with Castaneda's bestseller, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, Berkeley (CA): University of California Press 1968.

16 M. J. Harner, *The Way of the Shaman...*

17 Most notably M. Eliade, *Shamanism...*, 504-505.

18 Authors such as Lynn Andrews, Taisha Abelar, Florinda Donner, Jeremy Narby or Charles Hyemeyohsts Storm.

bunked as full of fabrications,<sup>19</sup> the motif of the sorcerer's apprentice at the crossroads of the Euro-American Western world persists.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the path of the Western seeker to shamanism was definitively opened up and institutionalised by the anthropologist-turned-shaman Michael Harner, who left academia and, after several smaller pilot workshops, founded "The Centre for Shamanic Studies" in 1979, which, since 1987, has been known as the "Foundation for Shamanic Studies" (FSS). The impact of Harner on modern shamanism cannot be overstated, as he effectively articulated the principles of neo-shamanism for Western audiences. FSS stands as the most successful Western adaptation of shamanism for Western society.

Harner's construction of shamanism (referred to as "core shamanism") is based on Eliade's notion of universalism (i.e., the foundation of shamanism – that is, the technique of ecstasy – is the same all over the world); the concept of two worlds into which the shaman journeys; the crucial idea of the centre of the world (Eliade's *axis mundi*); and its symbolic manifestations (mountain, cosmic tree, etc.). However, in contrast to Castaneda, Harner offers his students more than a description of "native practices". He provides them with clear instructions on how to enter the shamanic world using drums, as outlined in his famous book *The Way of the Shaman*, and in FSS seminars, which subsequently practise and teach core shamanism further.

FSS's impact extends beyond the Western world. Through the FSS-sponsored "Living Treasures" project, the organisation assumed the role of a moderator of diverse forms of shamanisms worldwide. By sponsoring and training local native shamans in the FSS's methods, it plays a pivotal role in determining who is considered a shaman and whose practices are worthy of financial support and thus preservation.<sup>21</sup>

Over the course of thirty years, Harner's vision of shamanism gradually became the universally accepted form of contemporary shamanism,

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19 Most of the credit for debunking Castaneda goes to Richard de Mille, *Castaneda's Journey: The Power and the Allegory*, Santa Barbara (CA): Capra Press 1976; and Richard de Mille, *The Don Juan Papers: Further Castaneda Controversies*, Santa Barbara (CA): Ross-Erickson 1980. For a more contextual overview, see Jay Courtney Fikes, *Carlos Castaneda: Academic Opportunism and the Psychedelic Sixties*, Victoria: Millenia Press 1993.

20 Ageeth Sluis describes the trend to show U.S. as a bastion of rationality and civilisation, while Mexico as a mysterious realm. Ageeth Sluis, "Journey to Others and Lessons of Self: Carlos Castaneda in Camposcape", *The Journal of Transnational American Studies* 4/2, 2012, 1-21.

21 Ulla Johansen, "Shamanism and Neoshamanism: What Is the Difference?", in: Henri-Paul Francfort – Roberte N. Hamayon (eds.), *The Concept of Shamanism: Uses and Abuses*, Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó 2001, 297-304: 301.

and it is today considered a natural (and ancient) gateway to contact with the “supernatural” world as such. During my recent research interview with a professional shaman, it became clear that, despite the evident inspiration of core shamanism in his practice, he had no previous knowledge of Harner or FSS. Instead, he claimed that he gained this knowledge from his mentors.<sup>22</sup> This story illustrates how core shamanism has seamlessly integrated into mainstream practice; it is no longer a universal technique distilled from its cultural biases, as Harner stated, but the tradition itself.

## 2. Contemporary shamans as healing experts

From this brief overview it becomes evident how diverse the image of shamanism can be and how, over the past three centuries, this concept has served as a projection screen for various kinds of Western wishful thinking and perceptions of “other” and “foreign” cultures.<sup>23</sup> The Harnerian image of shamanism has become a launch pad for the realisation of contemporary shamanism, shaping its manifestation through the process of inventing tradition.<sup>24</sup>

The long-term field research which I have conducted within shamanic communities in the Czech Republic has shown that the Harnerian legacy manifested particularly in healing practices constitutes a significant (if not the most important) facet of shamanic practise. Grounded in participant observations and in-depth interviews involving both professional shamans and everyday practitioners, this research has thus primarily focused on the perspectives of both actors in the healing process.

Before proceeding further, it is important to acknowledge that, in accordance with the conclusions drawn by fellow researchers in other countries,<sup>25</sup> the core tenets of contemporary shamanism in the Czech Republic are underlined by the emphasis given to the following concepts:

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- 22 Interview with shaman Olaf 12. 7. 2023. The names of all informants in this article have been anonymised.
  - 23 Thomas Karl Alberts, *Shamanism, Discourse, Modernity*, London: Routledge 2015, 89-98.
  - 24 Where that tradition is rather an act of inventing than something inherently established, as proposed by Stefania Palmisano – Nicola Pannofino (eds.), *Invention of Tradition and Syncretism in Contemporary Religions: Sacred Creativity*, New York (NY): Palgrave Macmillan 2017.
  - 25 E.g., Galina Lindquist, *Shamanic Performance on the Urban Scene: Neo-Shamanism in Contemporary Sweden* (Stockholm Studies in Social Anthropology 39), Stockholm: University of Stockholm 1997; or Merete Demant Jakobsen, *Shamanism: Traditional and Contemporary Approaches to the Mastery of Spirits and Healing*, Oxford: Berghahn Books 1999.



- 1 **Democracy:** In contemporary shamanism, there is a strong emphasis on inclusivity and accessibility. In Harner's perspective, "anyone can become a shaman", and it is not limited to a privileged or gifted few.<sup>26</sup> Through his FSS seminars, shamanic techniques are available to anyone willing to undertake the necessary practices and training. A scholar of religious studies, Thomas A. DuBois, adds that being a contemporary shaman is a conscious choice, meaning that those who take on this role do so voluntarily, guided by their spiritual calling, which is in opposition to the traditional viewpoint.<sup>27</sup>
- 2 **Universality:** Contemporary shamanism promotes the idea that shamanic practices are universal and can be found in various cultures and societies. Harner presents shamanism as a universal technique for accessing the "otherworld", and he uses a metaphor of the eternal shamanic core devoid of cultural flesh. However, critics argue that there is no such singular and universal core of shamanism, and that Harner's core shamanism is rather a Western adaptation free of discomfiting non-Western cultural norms and context.<sup>28</sup> Harnerian vision allows contemporary shamanism to be flexible and fully compatible with other currents of alternative spirituality, allowing the shamanic identity and shamanic techniques to be just one of many on one's spiritual path.
- 3 **Unbroken tradition:** This aspect of contemporary shamanism draws on the romanticised idea of the "noble savage", which portrays ancient and indigenous people as living in harmony with nature and having deep spiritual insights. It is believed that these people possess a profound spiritual bond with the natural world, and fragments of this ancient wisdom persist. Contemporary shamans seek to reconnect with this lost knowledge, viewing it as a path to authentic spiritual life.<sup>29</sup> Different versions of this idea may find these "noble savages" in various ancient cultures or historical groups, such as Celts, Germans, or Slavs,<sup>30</sup>

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26 Michael Harner, "What Is a Shaman?", in: Gary Doore (ed.), *Shaman's Path: Healing, Personal Growth and Empowerment*, Boston (MA): Shambhala 1988, 7-17: 9.

27 T. A. DuBois, *An Introduction to Shamanism...*, 264-290.

28 Critics argue that Harner's "synthesis" is more his wishful thinking than an accurate description; see Jeroen W. Boekhoven, *Genealogies of Shamanism...*, 244; or Florian Gredig, *Finding New Cosmologies: Shamans in Contemporary Europe*, Berlin: LIT 2009, 40-44.

29 Some interpretations of shamanism aim to find ancient wisdom within their local traditions, which can lead to the adoption of national rhetoric as discussed in László Kürti, "Neoshamanism, National Identity, and the Holy Crown of Hungary", *Journal of Religion in Europe* 8/2, 2015, 235-260.

30 Valuable anthropological insights are offered by Siv Ellen Kraft – Trude Fonneland – James R. Lewis (eds.), *Nordic Neoshamanisms* (Palgrave Studies in New Religions and Alternative Spiritualities), New York (NY): Palgrave Macmillan 2015.

or in contemporary societies which are imagined as being trapped in some version of an Eliadeian *illud tempus*.

- 4 **Healing:** Within contemporary shamanism, one of the pivotal roles attributed to shamans is that of a healer.<sup>31</sup> It is strongly believed that shamans possess a unique ability to perceive unseen spiritual realms and access guidance from these non-ordinary dimensions. As a result, their healing capabilities are highly sought after when other methods fail to provide solutions. Lévi-Strauss's concept of a wounded healer is widely popular, suggesting that personal struggles and challenges can ultimately lead to both physical and spiritual recovery. Through their own transformative journeys, both shamans and their clients achieve a profound understanding of suffering, enabling clients to heal themselves and shamans to offer genuine empathy and insight to their clients. In the broader realm of alternative spirituality, shamans are often viewed as "free riders"<sup>32</sup> on spiritual paths, taking on the role of psychopomps. They are seen as spiritual guides who help lost souls and navigate them to a metaphorical spiritual haven.

In practice, contemporary shamanism is often viewed by common practitioners, sympathisers, or clients who engage in Harner's shamanic techniques primarily as a method of accessing the realms beyond the gates of daily reality (Harner's "altered state of consciousness"), gaining deeper understandings of their inner experiences, and developing trust in their own intuitions. In the case of shamanic professionals (i.e., those who make a living through shamanism), my research has shown a particular emphasis on teaching shamanic techniques and providing healing sessions.

This point can be explored in more detail. Within the context of shamanic healing, which is classified as symbolic healing, the relationship between alternative spirituality and contemporary shamanisms takes on a status of acute significance. As demonstrated by the anthropologist James Dow in his groundbreaking article "Universal Aspects of Symbolic Healing", shared culture-specific symbols are a *sine qua non* for success-

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31 The theme of healing as the primary focus of contemporary shamanism is discussed by Peter N. Jones, "Shamanism: An Inquiry into the History of the Scholarly Use of the Term in English-Speaking North America", *Anthropology of Consciousness* 17/2, 4-3. Compare with Noel's conception of neo-shamanism as rooted in Jungian psychotherapy: Daniel C. Noel, *The Soul of Shamanism: Western Fantasies, Imaginal Realities*, New York (NY): Continuum 1997; or Kathryn Rountree, "The Spirits Are Cosmopolitan Too: Contemporary Shamanism in Malta", in: Kathryn Rountree (ed.), *Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism, and Modern Paganism* (Palgrave Studies in New Religions and Alternative Spiritualities), New York (NY): Palgrave Macmillan 2016, 245-268.

32 Informal interview with shaman Jeroným, 29. 7. 2020.

ful symbolic healing.<sup>33</sup> The effectiveness of shamanic symbolic healing strongly relies on a shared and culturally specific conception of the mythic world, where symbols function as generalised symbolic media.<sup>34</sup>

In the vast majority of cases, shamanic healing takes place in the form of a one-to-one session and the shaman typically works within the framework of Harner's teachings, creatively adapting and incorporating his concepts. After listening to the client's issues, the shaman begins drumming and embarks on a "shamanic journey" into alternate realms, where the source of the problem and its resolution are sought. The shaman then narrates this journey to the client in varying levels of detail. The language used by the shamans during this process is metaphorical, helping the clients to articulate their concerns, focus on them, and experience themselves in new ways.

As the shaman immerses himself into an altered state of reality, the information about the client's issues or distress transforms itself from an analytical language into a more dream-like, symbolic language, encompassing associations and sensations that are less accessible from the perspective of our ordinary reality. The shamanic session and subsequent healing rituals help the client to find a meaningful narrative that contextualises their suffering within the larger framework of their life. Consequently, the shaman's client gains insight not only into the true nature of their illness (e.g., that their chronic pain may mirror their damaged relationships) but also into its underlying cause (e.g., the lost part of a soul).<sup>35</sup>

However, for this transfer of understanding to occur and for the healing narrative to be effective, the shaman must precisely align their descriptions with the metaphors and worldviews that the client shares. Yet, clients are often unfamiliar with the specific cosmologies of contemporary shamans (e.g., power animals). Therefore, when shamans describe their visions and experiences during the shamanic journey, they employ a "deeper level" of shared understanding. They do so by flexibly using the language of the shared worldviews of alternative spirituality, culture, and pop culture lore.<sup>36</sup>

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33 James Dow, "Universal Aspects of Symbolic Healing: A Theoretical Synthesis", *American Anthropologist* 88, 1986, 56-69.

34 *Ibid.*, 63.

35 More comprehensive information about the structure and process of the shamanic healing session can be found in Helena Dyndová, "Contemporary Czech Shamanism: A Case Study of Ritual Practice and Healing", *Český lid* 107, 2020, 149-166.

36 This ability that "crosses and crisscrosses a series of cultural lines and vectors" is also typical of other contemporary healers. Cf. Catherine L. Albanese, "The Aura of Wellness: Subtle-Energy Healing and New Age Religion", *Religion and American Culture* 10/1, 2000, 29-55: 49.

For instance, one shaman asked my informant (her client), if she believed in angels and adapted her description accordingly, while another shaman drew imagery from the cult movie “Lord of the Rings”. To sum up, for shamanic healing to be effective, the shaman must present a narrative of the client’s illness that meaningfully (re)structures the human experience of it, and, therefore, they must communicate in a way that the client can understand and relate to their representation.

### 3. The foundational shared worldview

Let me present this shared metaphorical language used in shamanic healing by considering the three discourse nodes that the scholar of religious studies Wouter Hanegraaff recognised in his authoritative study, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, as unifying cornerstones of the worldview of alternative spirituality: energy, holism, and the concept of the soul.<sup>37</sup> These key symbols will be related back to shamanism to highlight their crucial relevance in shamanic practice.

#### 3.1. Energy

In the realm of alternative spirituality, energy is a pivotal term which is frequently used to describe the essence of life itself. Nevertheless, it closely overlaps with the original concept of “life” as discussed by Paul Heelas in his authoritative monograph *Spiritualities of Life: New Age, Romanticism, and Consumptive Capitalism*.<sup>38</sup> As Heelas puts it, “[f]or participants, spirituality is life-itself, the ‘life-force’ or ‘energy’ which flows through all human life [...]”.<sup>39</sup> Energy is a pivotal term within the realm of alternative spirituality, and due to the frequency of its use its semantic field is wide-ranging. If we attempt a basic systematisation, aligned with Heelas’ observation, we can identify two significant (although not exclusive) meanings of the term “energy”:

*3.1.1. Energy is life itself.* Consistent with Heelas’ concept of “life”, the concept of energy is “the vital animating essence [...], heart of life, the ‘vital energy’, ‘universal energy’, ‘life-force’, chi, ki, prana, yin and yang”.<sup>40</sup> Energy is the fundamental building block of the universe, the

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37 Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, Leiden – New York (NY): Brill 1996.

38 Paul Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism*, Oxford: Willey – Blackwell 2009.

39 *Ibid.*, 27.

40 *Ibid.*, 32.

ultimate essence of all living and non-living things on Earth, including the human soul. It is often perceived as flowing like water through everything or acting as a network that connects the visible and invisible, material and the spiritual, humans and the cosmos. As summarised by one of my informants:

When it comes to energy, no matter if we call it the universe, God, or just energy, I have this feeling that there's this one energy source from which we're all separated from but at the same time we're all connected to, you know? It's like there's this divine energy inside us, in plants, in trees, in everything. It's this original energy that somehow links us all together.<sup>41</sup>

*3.1.2. Energy is a qualitative aspect of life.* The sociologist Wade Clark Roof noted that: “Contemporary quests for spirituality are really yearnings for a reconstructed interior life, deliberate and formative efforts aimed at forging an integrated self and transcending the limits of the given.”<sup>42</sup> In this sense, energy is understood as a qualitative aspect of existence, “expressed as love, tranquillity, [or] the wisdom of the ‘inner voice’”.<sup>43</sup> It has the potential to transform “negative subjectivities” into valuable life experiences that nurture personal growth in the process of “alchemical transformation” from the ordinary and mundane to the spiritual.<sup>44</sup> This perspective portrays energy not only as a neutral force but also as a significant qualitative dimension of life.

Although Harner barely mentions energies (he only refers to the term “energy” 12 times in his central book, mostly in the first context of “life vitality”), energies are an integral part of contemporary shamans’ vocabulary and working with energies is a significant part of shamanic practice. Energy is neutral by nature, but it can accumulate “positive” or “negative” information as it flows through the universe. Just as water can become polluted or purified, energy can also change. Negative thoughts or emotions can affect energy, making it become negative. This negative energy is described by my informants as “tuft”, “clump” or “sticky shadows” and causes physical and psychological discomfort.

Contemporary shamanism places great emphasis on working with energies for ritual purity. Keeping one’s home, food, clothing, relationships, intentions, and so on energetically “clean” is a crucial condition for having a good life. Redirecting, cleansing, sending away, or transforming negative

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41 Interview with Jarmila, 31. 10. 2017.

42 Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*, Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press 1999, 35.

43 P. Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life...*, 32.

44 Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, London: Bloomsbury 2013, 84.

energy are among the most common techniques that practitioners and professional shamans are engaged in. This process is often metaphorically compared to a cosmic tree or, less poetically, to a compost heap, both of which symbolise the transformation of unwanted (waste) into something desirable (the potential for growth).

Energy is thus directly related to human health. The more connected a person is to “good” energy, the greater “the harmony” they find in their life; so too the more “alive” they are, both spiritually and literally (for example, one is not sick). The better that a shaman can see the “energetic situation” of his client, the more likely he is to accurately identify the root cause of their problems. If we were to use the metaphor of energy as water once again, then energy is like water in the sense that its natural state is to flow. If energy becomes blocked within the human body, illness can occur. Illness is commonly interpreted as a blockage of energy, a roadblock built by clients or a foreign energy that needs to be removed from the body; alternatively, it is the presence of negative energy that needs cleansing.

### **3.2. Holism and the Harmony of Dualities**

As observed by Wouter Hanegraaff, the holism of alternative spirituality – as opposed to the doctrine of what holism is – is based upon a critique of Cartesian and Judeo-Christian worldviews, challenging their allegedly unbearable systems of dualism and reductionism respectively. In this framework, (1) the distinction between Creator and the created, (2) the separation between humanity and nature, and (3) the divide between spirit and matter are negated, blurring these boundaries.<sup>45</sup>

In his later work, Hanegraaff further highlights the undeniable (neo)-Platonic and Gnostic inspirations for the worldview of alternative spirituality. Put in a very simple and general way, alternative spirituality follows the Platonic *scala naturae* (“the great chain of being”), where all beings emanate from a divine source. However, in alternative spirituality, the hierarchical conclusion that proximity to the divine source produces a greater share of divinity is not endorsed. Instead, the divine is perceived as omnipresent, and all creations participate in it to a similar degree.<sup>46</sup>

Hanegraaff further notes that this Gnostic recognition of a “divine spark” within each person usually does not lead to a form of “metaphysical radicalism” that rejects the world created by the demiurge and is ruled by archons and from which one would long to escape through asceticism. However, as evidenced by the recent merging of alternative spirituality and

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45 *Ibid.*, 119.

46 *Ibid.*, 74.

conspiracy theories (conspirituality), such a position is also possible. Nonetheless, in most cases, the idea of holism manifests itself in what Hanegraaff calls “alchemical transformation” or what the scholar of religious studies Zuzana Kostićová calls “duality in balance”.<sup>47</sup>

What do these metaphors imply? The alchemical narrative proposed by Hanegraaff sees the initial state of humanity not as sinful, but as being in a state of spiritual immaturity and ignorance. This condition must be acknowledged and transformed into a spiritually evolved state, transitioning from “darkness to light”. Hanegraaff draws on Plato’s metaphor of the charioteer driving a chariot pulled by two horses: the first horse pulls the chariot upwards toward noble and divine goals, while the second horse drags it down towards worldly desires. However, in contemporary spirituality, these two metaphors of life’s journey lose their evaluative character and, instead of moralising, they emphasise mediation, balancing the desires of both horses, a life in harmony with both aspects.<sup>48</sup>

As Zuzana Kostićová explains in her monograph *2012: The Mayan Calendar, Transformation of Consciousness, Two Worlds, and Balance*, a material world devoid of the spiritual would become a rigid, depersonalised machine, “where each component has to blindly and endlessly perform its assigned function, gradually losing its individuality”.<sup>49</sup> The converse, living solely in a spiritual realm, is similarly undesirable, as one would “drift away” and become disconnected from this life.

The motifs of holism and balance are implicitly omnipresent in contemporary shamanism. The dualities of body-soul, male-female, work-leisure, and nature-culture must all be in equilibrium, as they are part of the all-encompassing cosmic energy. This interconnectedness is depicted through the imagery of flowing energies. Shamanic courses are not intended to make participants reject the ordinary world, but rather to function fully within it, while simultaneously nurturing their spiritual aspects. Phrases such as “awakening spiritual potential”, “finding the inner goddess” and similar expressions of self-motivation serve as coping strategies in this world, not escape-strategies from it.

After shamanic workshops, participants can even be advised to avoid acting impulsively in their regular lives – for example, not to quit their job immediately because it does not fulfil their awakened spiritual needs.<sup>50</sup>

47 *Ibid.*, 84; Zuzana Marie Kostićová, *2012: Mayský kalendář, transformace vědomí, dva světy a rovnováha*, Praha: Malvern 2011.

48 W. J. Hanegraaff, *Western esotericism*, 75-76.

49 Z. M. Kostićová, *2012...*, 211.

50 Field notes from a shamanic workshop, held 3. – 5. 3. 2017, taken by Roman Galovič, as part of a joint grant project “Bears, foxes and jaguars: a religious-anthropological analysis of the forms of contemporary urban neo-shamanism”, FF/VG/2017/20.



Overemphasising spiritual needs over practical needs can be equally detrimental, as my informant reported, humorously and self-ironically assessing her mood after different shamanic sessions: “I came out of there [the shamanic workshop] and I was [ready] to hop on a broom and fly away.”<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, it is desirable for all components of the self which extend beyond the mere dichotomy of body and soul, such as the ego or the heart-mind, to find equilibrium, each following its role. This ideal state is aptly described by my informant:

The soul alone cannot lead, or else we'll be floating somewhere in the clouds, drifting on a little cloud, doing photosynthesis and being like: ‘Hm... I'm somewhere completely elsewhere (*dreamily*).’ I am here and now, that's why harmony and balance matter. That means the body has its needs too. It needs to eat, to drink, to pee [...]. Basically, all these aspects should work together [...].<sup>52</sup>

This holism is also evident in shamanic healing. While Western biomedicine and psychotherapy aim to reintegrate patients into mainstream society from which the suffering individual has become estranged, and normalise potentially pathological phenomena, the ultimate outcome of shamanic healing is to embrace this “deviation” and redirect the client onto a different life path, one which is aligned with the spiritual orientation of the contemporary shamanic worldview. The goal is for the patient to “awaken” and initiate at least elementary spiritual work on themselves, to start balancing their mundane and spiritual lives.

### 3.3. Soul

The concept of the soul plays a distinct role in contemporary alternative spirituality. The soul is perceived as the part of our self that is immortal, existing both before and after our current life. In examining the concept of the soul, Wouter Hanegraaff introduces a highly useful framework proposed by Henry Reed, a representative of the perspective of alternative spirituality. According to this model, the relationship between an individual and what is often described as the “divine essence” or the “inner deity” could be likened to a star-like formation: while the core of the star is common to all and represents the “divine consciousness” or “cosmic energy”, its individual rays symbolise distinct human (and simultaneously divine) Selves.<sup>53</sup>

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51 Interview with Meda, 31. 7. 2020.

52 Interview with Blanka, 7. 8. 2020.

53 W. J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion...*, 205.



Although all facets of life are meant to be in harmony, the soul determines the fundamental direction of a person, for it is the immortal extension of universal cosmic energy. As one of my informants summarised it: “But it’s like that the body supports the soul. If they come into conflict or contradiction, it’s the soul that decides, because the soul knows what it’s here to do, the soul needs to remember, the soul needs to find itself.”<sup>54</sup>

Hence, the soul enters human life with its own history of past lives and karmic or ancestral burdens. Simultaneously, the soul enters this life with a purpose; the prevailing view is that the soul selects this particular life realisation to gain a certain type of experience. In contemporary shamanism, ignoring or neglecting the desires of the soul can manifest as a physical or psychological issue; the soul communicates through the body to show its disapproval of the direction in which a person is heading. As expressed by a professional shaman:

In many cases, I communicate with the client’s soul because “their human” is going in a different direction than the soul would like to. As a result, it throws obstacles in their path, trying to push them back on track. And they resist and want to earn millions here, instead of meditating in the Himalayas. So, they break their leg, lose their job, and eventually it sends them to Tibet.<sup>55</sup>

Understanding what the soul actually seeks here and what it is meant to experience is a pivotal task for every shamanic apprentice (sometimes referred to by shamans as “finding the sacred dream of the soul”).<sup>56</sup> Shamans dedicate considerable time to this question of life’s meaning through an initiation ritual called the “vision quest”, in which individual participants spend several days in isolation at a specific location, awaiting (and often receiving) a vision of their purpose of life.

Another popular healing technique in contemporary shamanism is the retrieval of the lost part of the soul, a practise notably popularised by Harner’s colleague, the shaman Sandra Ingerman.<sup>57</sup> This technique is based on the notion that the soul consists of infinite parts. Due to trauma or lifestyle choices, individuals may (un)knowingly push parts of their soul away from themselves, creating a vacancy that logically prevents them from being complete. Even worse, these lost parts of the soul may be replaced with foreign and undesirable entities. Consequently, a person is not integrated (is not whole) and this disharmony signifies reduced life energy

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54 Interview with Meda, 31. 7. 2020.

55 Interview with the shaman Jan, Helena Dyndová, *Český šamanismus v rozhovorech*, Praha: Dingir 2018, 215.

56 Interview with the shaman Ivo, *ibid.*, 178.

57 Sandra Ingerman, *Soul Retrieval: Mending the Fragmented Self*, New York (NY): Harper Collins 2011.

(fatigue, depression, aimless wandering through life), which can even lead to illness. For instance, according to one of my shaman-informants, a missing part of the soul caused a uterine tumour in one of his clients.<sup>58</sup> The shaman's task is then to enter another world, locate the missing part of the client's soul, energetically cleanse the absent spot within the client's body, and return the soul to its rightful place.

#### 4. Shamanism as a Configuration of Alternative Spirituality

The worldviews of alternative spirituality and contemporary shamanism can be combined with one another to a large extent, as demonstrated through three examples discussed in the previous section. What does this mean for the relationship between shamanism and alternative spirituality? As rightly noted by Hultkrantz and Pharo, shamanism has never been a religion *sui generis*; it has always existed within larger religious frameworks, sharing significant intersections in their worldviews.<sup>59</sup> So, is contemporary shamanism a part of alternative spirituality?

To address this question, it is important to first define shamanism. However, defining shamanism is a distinct area of interest within academic research that has yet to reach a consensus. The term “shaman” has been problematic from the beginning. Initially it was an *ad hoc* chosen emic term for a specific religious specialist from a particular ethnic group (Tungus) that has served as a prototype of Siberian religiosity.<sup>60</sup> This perception gradually permeated European folklore and ethnographic dictionaries and soon took on a life of its own.

Today, the terms “shaman” and “shamanism” are considered umbrella terms that once originated in Siberia, their *locus classicus*, but have since expanded worldwide to describe diverse indigenous spiritualities encountered by European and American expeditions.<sup>61</sup> This epistemological challenge complicates matters significantly. The term is artificial and laden with various meanings, which have been used in various ways by different researchers and laypeople over its long history. Therefore, the term

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58 Interview with Blanka, 7. 8. 2020.

59 Lars Kirkhusmo Pharo, “Methodology for a Deconstruction and Reconstruction of the Concepts ‘Shaman’ and ‘Shamanism’”, *Numen* 58/1, 2011, 6-70; Åke Hultkrantz, “A Definition of Shamanism”, *Temenos – Nordic Journal for the Study of Religion* 9, 1973, 25-37: 36.

60 Alcida Rita Ramos, “Pulp Fictions of Indigenism”, in: Donald S. Moore – Jake Kosek – Anand Pandian (eds.), *Race, Nature, and the Politics of Difference*, Durham – London: Duke University 2003, 356-379.

61 Graham Harvey – Robert J. Wallis, *Historical Dictionary of Shamanism* (Second Edition), Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield 2016, 4.

“shamanism(s)” may, but also may not, encompass practically anything.<sup>62</sup> Thus, there are voices advocating for the removal of the term from the vocabulary of social sciences.

However, as pointed out by Lars Pharo in his seminal and comprehensive article “Methodology for a Deconstruction and Reconstruction of the Concepts ‘Shaman’ and ‘Shamanism’”, this is not a practical solution for two reasons. First, it is too late; the term is deeply ingrained and will be used regardless of the researcher’s personal outlook. Rejecting it in scholarly work would only mean excluding oneself from ongoing debate. Second, removing it would eliminate the hypothetical possibility of comparison between various religious traditions.<sup>63</sup>

Pharo suggests that, if we approach the category of “shamanism” analytically and define its meaning properly, it can still be a useful term. So, how should we understand the term “shamanism”? First and foremost, shamanism cannot be considered a religious system. Pharo argues persuasively that “shamanism” should not be equated to “indigenous religion”. Shamanism is not a religion of primitive-communal societies lacking hierarchical religious institutions producing “priests”. It’s not some ancient (archaic) religion that has fallen into disuse and remained as a mere relic in other religious systems, as proposed by Eliade.<sup>64</sup>

Shamanism has always been “only” a configuration of religious practices and beliefs within a certain system. It has never been a dominant religious direction; on the contrary, it has always coexisted with other religious practises or systems, whether those were local, tribal religious practices, or more hegemonic religious systems like Buddhism or Christianity. Thus, the context of shamanism is an essential part of its realisation, and it cannot be omitted or isolated as a religious system *sui generis*. Shamanism is inherently intertwined with many different religious traditions.<sup>65</sup>

In the light of these points, it would be most reasonable to say that shamanism is a remarkably widespread “technique of ecstasy”, as suggested by the two most famous authors writing about shamanism, Eliade and the later Harner. However, there is a catch hidden in the works of these renowned authors. Neither of them could resist providing a functionalist definition to describe some kind of “universal type” of shamanism, including details such as where shamans travel, for whom and for what purpose

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62 A case in point is Africa, where there is no evidence of “Eliadean shamanism”, as Hutton notes in *Shamans...*, 124-125.

63 L. K. Pharo, “Methodology for a Deconstruction...”, 26-27.

64 *Ibid.*, 18-21.

65 Å. Hultkrantz, “A Definition of Shamanism...”, 36-37.

they employ the journey, or the description of the correct means to reach this altered state of consciousness.

Yet, these universality-oriented notions of shamanism eventually crumble under the weight of empirical material that defies adaptation to universal and synthesising categories such as the “upper” and “lower” worlds and shows a variety of shamanic roles (medicine man, medium, seer, teacher) and social configurations (within or on the fringes of society, serving individuals or the community). The diversity of ritual paraphernalia, modes of initiation of shamanic adepts, culturally conditioned inductions, performances, and intensities of manifestations of “altered states of consciousness” all showcase that such universalised notions of shamanism fall apart.

In contrast with this universality-oriented notion, I suggest viewing shamanism as “one aspect or ‘configuration’ within the culture’s religious system”.<sup>66</sup> Instead of treating shamanism as a separate tradition, we can see it as a type of spiritual work, an analytical category or “ideal type” that varies across different religious-cultural areas. This approach would allow us to maintain the shared category of “shamanism”, enabling comparisons of these configurations without trying to find a common foundation for shamanic beliefs or techniques. The cultural conditioning of shamanic expressions would remain a crucial aspect in this definition, as highlighted by Pharo:

The “shaman” is a religious specialist who, in the context of a ritual, has the ability to travel to a non-human (supernatural) world, to have direct communication with supernatural beings (deities, spirits, etc.) there, and then to return to the human world. [...] Supernatural (non-human) space does not necessarily denote an upper or a lower world; it can also refer to other culturally defined spatial categories to which humans ordinarily have no access.<sup>67</sup>

Thus, what defines a shaman is their extraordinary contact with the supernatural world, which serves the purpose of providing assistance either to an individual or a community. This definition is broad but benefits from not attempting to define a specific “shamanic technique” or providing a more precise outline of “shamanic cosmology”, “shamanic rituals”, “shamanic altered states of consciousness”, or “shamanic paraphernalia”, etc.

Instead, this perspective acknowledges that these facets of shamanic practice are influenced by the cultural context. This methodological stance facilitates the potential for comparative analysis, with contemporary shamanism itself becoming a valid subject of such comparative exploration.

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<sup>66</sup> L. K. Pharo, “Methodology for a Deconstruction...”, 11.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

In this light, contemporary shamanism, which is not usually included in the broader (and sometimes random) category of native shamanisms, could be treated in the same way as any other form of shamanism. It would align with a wider, shared cultural-religious environment, in this case alternative spirituality. But how would contemporary shamanism fit into the definitions provided by the mentioned authors?

Hultkrantz suggests a definition of shamanism which emphasises that the central idea of shamanism is to establish contact with the supernatural world through ecstatic experience. He identified four constituent elements and the overarching motivation of shamanism:

- There is an ideological premise of the supernatural world and the contacts with it.
- The shaman acts on behalf of a human group.
- Inspiration is given to him by his helping spirits.
- The shaman perceives extraordinary and ecstatic experiences.<sup>68</sup>

In contemporary shamanism, the supernatural world could be shaped by general motives which originate from alternative spirituality (cosmic tree, energies) as well as more specifically from Harner's inspiration (power animal, lost part of a soul). A contemporary shaman might prioritise serving an individual rather than a group (or to perceive the service to community in a broader and more abstract sense), which is in accordance with individualised Western society that believes initiating change at a broader level can begin only with transformation at the individual level.<sup>69</sup>

The interaction with helping spirits and the manifestation of ecstatic experiences in contemporary shamanism are similarly present and culturally conditioned. Given that we are unaccustomed to intense physical manifestations within spiritual practices of any kind, it is perhaps unsurprising that the ecstatic states of contemporary shamans are "milder". And considering our inclination to perceive nature and its inhabitants in a predominantly benevolent light, it is natural that the helping spirits are per-

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68 Åke Hultkrantz, "Ecological and Phenomenological Aspects of Shamanism", in: Andrei A. Znamenski, *Shamanism: Critical Concepts in Sociology*, vol. 3, London: Routledge 2004 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1978), 146-171: 148.

69 For a comparison with the findings of Carolina Ivanescu and Sterre Berentzen, who conducted a questionnaire survey among online active shamans and shamanic practitioners, see Carolina Ivanescu – Sterre Berentzen, "Becoming a Shaman: Narratives of Apprenticeship and Initiation in Contemporary Shamanism", *Religions* 11/362, 2020, 1-21: 17-18.

ceived as sources of sagacious counsel, as offering guidance, and as safeguarding the shaman.<sup>70</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

This article has aimed to demonstrate that contemporary shamanism is a fully integrated part of alternative spirituality, which is inseparably woven into its worldview fabric. Although it retains its unique characteristics, authorities, and institutions, its overarching discursive framework lies both in the core values of Western culture and, more specifically, in the realm of alternative spirituality and its worldviews. Indeed, the lasting popularity of contemporary shamanism appears to be due to its skilful incorporation of the ethos and perspectives of alternative spirituality.

Contemporary Harnerian (or post-Harnerian) shamanism coexists harmoniously with other popular currents and is adept at collaborating with or partially incorporating them, creatively building upon them, and synthesising them with its teachings. It successfully integrates elements from popular trends in current religiosity, such as neopagan practices (e.g., Old Norse or Slavic traditions), while seamlessly integrating westernised concepts derived from Eastern teachings and practises, like auras or meditation. Moreover, it also incorporates vernacular Christian beliefs, such as operating with angels as helping spirits and guides, as well as secular relaxation and psychotherapeutic techniques into its practice.

This constant syncretism of various spiritual streams leads to the observation that many religious specialists and practitioners of contemporary shamanism employ shamanic techniques even if they do not categorise themselves as shamans; they intertwine and amalgamate these practices spontaneously with other doctrines. This inclusive aspect of it has been subject to various evaluations by scholars. Some critical authors view it as an inauthentic “mixed-as-you-please spirituality”, which, in their view, has appropriated (stolen) and misinterpreted original native spiritual practises.<sup>71</sup> However, more reconciliatory authors point out the spiritual benefits and creative aspects of contemporary shamanism.<sup>72</sup>

In my view, for contemporary shamanism to continue to flourish and prosper in the Western world, it must align with the worldview of alternative spirituality. It must possess the capacity to assimilate and develop its

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70 For a more thorough analysis, see Helena Dyndová, “The Reflection of Carlos Castaneda and His Work in the Milieu of Contemporary Czech Shamanism”, *Central European Journal for Contemporary Religion* 2, 2019, 75-90: 84-87.

71 Ward Churchill, “Spiritual Hucksterism: The rise of the plastic medicine men”, in: Graham Harvey (ed.), *Shamanism: a reader*, London: Routledge 2003, 324-333.

72 R. J. Wallis, *Shamans/Neo-Shamans...*

fundamental concepts, along with the skill to translate foreign cultures and native spiritualities into the language of alternative spirituality. This translation should ensure compatibility and acceptance within the ethos, worldview, and practises of its adherents. In other words, contemporary shamanism should be comprehensible, both discursively and performatively, if it is to be recognised and practised.

Given the distinct sociocultural environment, the parameters of contemporary shamanism naturally evolve. The service offered by contemporary shamans will be to provide healing and spiritual growth, not to find a path for the reindeer herd. Furthermore, it is important that the paraphernalia is culturally conditioned: herbs sourced from other parts of the world will evoke an alleged connection to the ancient wisdom of tribes living in harmony with Mother Nature, and secure drumming will replace restricted hallucinogens.<sup>73</sup> Divergences also extend to the performance and status of shamanism: altered states of consciousness are often subtly manifested, resembling meditation more than dramatic show, while shamanism itself is perceived as a freely accessible pursuit, one that anyone can learn. Yet, the democratisation of knowledge, which has been inherent to our culture since the era of modernisation, has extended even to once-esoteric writings. Contemporary shamanism is easily accessible, often as one among many courses that facilitate spiritual journeys.

I believe that this perspective can bestow on contemporary shamanism the same validity and significance that acquired shamanisms possess within other religious systems. There is no need to scrutinise its claim to existence, question the persuasiveness of its method of trance, or judge whether or not it should be taken seriously, as it operates neither in taiga nor in the jungle, but rather in urban settings, not within traditional societies (ideally “primitive”), but as an integral part of the religious milieu termed “alternative spirituality”, which is part of even more “liquid” post-modern society.<sup>74</sup>

Contemporary shamanism does not embody a continual tradition stemming from the dawn of civilisation, as its practitioners might wish, but nor is it the result of mere allochronic cherry picking from disparate cultures, as its critics might contend.<sup>75</sup> In line with other configurations of shaman-

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73 In recent years, however, we can observe a resurgence in the usage of hallucinogens, for more detail see Clancy Cavnar – Beatriz Caiuby Labate (eds.), *The Expanding World Ayahuasca Diaspora: Appropriation, Integration, and Legislation*, London: Taylor and Francis 2018.

74 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2000.

75 For a discussion on various points of criticism of contemporary shamanism, see Robert J. Wallis, “Altered States, Conflicting Cultures: Shamans, Neo-shamans, and Academics”, *Anthropology of Consciousness* 10/2-3, 1999, 41-49; or Robert J. Wallis,



ism that researchers have designated globally, contemporary shamanism constitutes a religious practice, allowing certain individuals to access the “otherworld” in altered states of consciousness, intervening for someone’s benefit (or to their detriment), or, in its professional variant, facilitating treatment for the shaman’s clients. The fact that this religious practice, thanks to Harner’s systematisation, dexterously and confidently “translates” and synthesises other religious influences into its fold is a proof of its viability, not its inauthenticity.

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“Journeying the Politics of Ecstasy: Anthropological Perspectives on Neoshamanism”, *The Pomegranate* 6, 1998, 20-28.





## SUMMARY

**Contemporary Shamanism and Alternative Spirituality: Exploring Relationships and Intersections**

Contemporary shamanism, often referred to as neo-shamanism, is a popular spiritual practice within the modern landscape of non-institutionalized religiosity. This paper explores the relationship between contemporary shamanism and alternative spirituality (formerly also labelled as the New Age) in depth, underlining that contemporary shamanism owes much of its success to its compatibility with the religious worldviews of today's era. In this sense, contemporary shamanism works similarly to "native" shamanisms, acting not as an independent religious system but as a configuration within distinct sociocultural and religious contexts.

The article discusses the discursive transformation over the past three centuries that has led to the contemporary perception of the shaman as a healer, stressing the pivotal role of Michael Harner and his Foundation for Shamanic Studies in shaping and establishing contemporary shamanism. Drawing from extensive fieldwork in neo-shamanic communities, it shows how contemporary shamanism has adapted and "translated" the three key motifs of alternative spirituality (the concepts of energy, holism, and the soul) and uses them in healing practice. Ultimately, this article posits how contemporary shamanism fits within the broader tapestry of alternative spirituality, emphasizing that its adaptability is an asset, not an inauthentic glitch.

**Keywords:** contemporary shamanism; neo-shamanism; alternative spirituality; Michael Harner; New Age; definition of shamanism

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