

# The Reflection of Carlos Castaneda and His Work in the Milieu of Contemporary Czech Shamanism

Helena Dyndová

<https://doi.org/10.14712/25704893.2020.1>

**Abstract:** The article deals with the analysis of Carlos Castaneda's legacy in the contemporary Czech shamanic milieu, with his literary successors, and with continuity of his teachings explained in famous decalogy about shaman-sorcerer don Juan. The first part is dedicated to the *zeitgeist* of Castaneda's writings, focusing on Mircea Eliade's and Michael Harner's influence. The second part analyses more narrowly the reflection on Castaneda's personality and work from the current shamanic point of view. The following part introduces Castaneda's literary impact within the specific Czech context and discusses his more successful followers. The last part compares the message of Castaneda's work and current Czech shamans' teachings considering the similarities and differences, namely the relationship with nature and with spiritual allies, following with shaman's image, purpose, and responsibility. The article concludes that despite respecting Castaneda's importance in the history of shamanic revival, the contemporary Czech shamans share little with the original Castaneda's teachings.

**Keywords:** Contemporary shamanism; Czech shamanism; Neo-Shamanism; Contemporary Spirituality; Czech Spirituality; Carlos Castaneda

**Abstrakt:** Článek se zabývá analýzou odkazu Carlose Castanedy v současném českém šamanském prostředí, zmiňuje jeho knižní následovníky a analyzuje kontinuitu Castanedova učení, které je vylíčeno v slavné knižní dekalogii o šamanovi-kouzelníkovi donu Juanovi. První část se věnuje duchu doby, ve které Castaneda své dílo tvořil, s důrazem na vliv Mircea Eliada a Michaela Harnera. Druhá část se již plně soustředí na analýzu Castanedovy osobnosti a díla očima současných šamanů. Následující část uvádí Castanedův literární odkaz do českého kontextu a představuje jeho úspěšné literární pokračovatele. Poslední část srovnává poselství Castanedova díla s učením současných českých šamanů s ohledem na podobnosti a rozdílnosti. Jmenovitě se zabývá vztahem šamana k přírodě a duchovním spojencům, dále pak obrazem šamana, jeho údělem a zodpovědností. Dochází se k závěru, že ačkoli současní šamané respektují Castanedovu důležitost pro oživení šamanismu, sami s jeho učením nijak zvlášť nesouzní.

**Klíčová slova:** současný šamanismus; český šamanismus; neošamanismus; současná spiritualita; česká spiritualita; Carlos Castaneda

*Received:* 6 September 2019, *Accepted:* 2 October 2019

*Published online:* 2 October 2020

**Helena Dyndová**, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts, Charles University

E-mail: [helena.dyndova@gmail.com](mailto:helena.dyndova@gmail.com)

© 2020 The Author. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>).

Whether or not Don Juan lived, I don't care. Even if it was just a functional story, I'm fine with that. Because, in the same way, I can think of myself: Does Tolkien invented Arda or does it exist somewhere?<sup>1</sup> Is this another version of our world? I'm trying to solve how shamanism and other mind-changing teachings enter other realities. This world has its reality that we now perceive. But it also has other realities, that we perceive while entering an altered state of consciousness. [...] Here you are ... [you], but if you go to another layer [of reality], you have a completely different story there, and you're someone else.<sup>2</sup>

As the title indicates, the central theme of this article will be the reflection of the prominent shamanovelist<sup>3</sup> Carlos Castaneda and his work in the context of contemporary Czech shamanism.<sup>4</sup> Its claims and the following analysis are based on my field research, conducted between 2017 and 2019. The research design was open and used the method of participant observation applied to contemporary shamanic practice, combined with semi-structured and informal interviews with professional shamans, long-term trainees, and enthusiasts.<sup>5</sup>

The current Czech shamanic milieu grew into its local specificities – for example that the translations of essential New Age (and shamanic) books were only available after 1989 – after the fall of the Iron Curtain.<sup>6</sup> This access to formerly inaccessible literature dramatically changed the mood and preferences of “spiritual seekers”. Because of this delay, Carlos Castaneda was not the first to come up with the discovery of the shamans' path, but rather one of many. That might explain his slightly lower popularity compared to the popularity of his literary successors.

These facts notwithstanding, Castaneda's legacy plays a vital role in contemporary Czech shamanism, and Czech shamans are familiar with his work. This article attempts to discuss firstly how Castaneda's works match with other important shamanic publication (regarding the accessible translations to Czech); secondly the reflection of Carlos Castaneda's character and the nature and authenticity of his writings;

<sup>1</sup> Arda is a land in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* universe.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with shaman V., July 12th, 2018. All the respondents I quote in this article knew about my research and my academic interest. However, in order to protect their identities, their names are anonymized under their initials.

<sup>3</sup> The shamanologist Daniel Noel coined the pun “shamanovelist” as a label for authors who formed and shaped the image of shamans. DANIEL C. NOEL, chap. “Lying with Shamanovelists”, in *The Soul of the Shamanism: Western Fantasies, Imaginal Realities*, New York: Continuum 1997, p. 63–82.

<sup>4</sup> I decided to respect the slightly pejorative connotation in the shamanic environment and chose to refer to my respondents as to current/contemporary shamans instead of ‘neoshamans’. For a more precise discussion of this emic/ethic issue, see ROBERT J. WALLIS, *Shamans/Neo-Shamans: Ecstasy, Alternative Archaeologies and Contemporary Pagans*, London and New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 27–34. At the same time, I intentionally skip the discussion about the definition of the terms ‘shaman’ and ‘shamanism’. For a thorough analysis of academic discussion see LARS KIRKHUSMO PHARO, “A Methodology for a Deconstruction and Reconstruction of the Concepts ‘Shaman’ and ‘Shamanism’”, *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions* 58 (1, 2011): p. 6–70.

<sup>5</sup> The methodological approaches are more precisely described in HELENA EXNEROVÁ, *Český šamanismus v rozhovorech* [Czech Shamanism in Dialogues], Praha: Dingir 2018, 228 p.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. ZDENĚK NEŠPOR and OLGA NEŠPOROVÁ, “Religion: An Unsolved Problem for the Modern Czech Nation”, *Czech Sociological Review* 45 (6, 2009): p. 1215–1237.

and thirdly the similarities and differences between Castaneda's worldview comparing to current Czech shamanic teachings. Still, at this point of departure, it shall be noted that Czech shamans are a very diverse group. This article attempts to search for shared points of emphasis and to compare a comprehensive complex of thoughts on the one hand and its remnants in a very individualistic spiritual practice on the other hand. With a dose of generalization, let us proceed to a summary of the parts of Castaneda's legacy which remained in the perception of the practice.

## Shamanism and Print Culture

Shamanism, as practiced today, was invented primarily based on the literature that described it, whether these be academic or experimental works (or a combination of both styles). Since the beginning of the 20th century, the image of shamanism has been predominantly determined by anthropologists who studied "shamanic" cultures and who later recognized shamanism in various cultures worldwide. Over in three hundred years of study, the general impression about shamanism has changed from demonization or medicalization to a more sensitive and understanding approach, which culminated in the 1960s as a mainstream admiration of shamans and their work.<sup>7</sup>

No wonder that many anthropologists writing about shamanism (shamanovelists) eventually became shamans (shamanthropologists)<sup>8</sup> themselves.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, many contemporary shamans from traditional societies started to read books written by these shamanovelists and then use them to teach people who come to seek "authentic indigenous spirituality" or reconstruct their pre-Christian religion.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, many Western seekers have become contemporary shamans by reading these books.

Thus, a kind of a book universe has been created, in which "traditional" shamans and shamanism gradually acquired a solid identity in popular discourse: A shaman is understood to be a noble savage, or more precisely a "noble Indian"; an extraordinary human being able to communicate with the world or worlds beyond ourselves. Shaman is a healer, a medicine man or woman, a wise figure, an extraordinary creative personality associated with the unspoiled ancient world of archaic wisdom that "we" have already lost. Through shamanism and its techniques, modern western spiritual-

<sup>7</sup> The history of the term "shaman" is long and complicated, full of researchers' projections, biases, and shifts in definitions. For a thorough summary see, ANDREI A. ZNAMENSKI, *The Beauty of the Primitive: Shamanism and the Western Imagination*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007, 434 p., or, JEROEN W. BOEKHOVEN, *Genealogies of Shamanism: Struggles for Power, Charisma and Authority*, Groningen: Barkhuis 2011, 383 p.

<sup>8</sup> A similar pun used by NOEL, *The Soul of the Shamanism ...*, p. 83–105 (chap. "Studying with Shamanthropologists").

<sup>9</sup> A Czech example of a shamanthropologist would be Pavlína Brzáková.

<sup>10</sup> ZNAMENSKI, *The Beauty of the Primitive*, p. 364. For a harsher anthropological critic see ALICE BECK KEHOE, *Shamans and Religion: An Anthropological Exploration in Critical Thinking*, Long Grove: Waveland Press 2000, 125 p.

ity has tried to set off on a path leading to authentic spirituality, to one's true self, to a union with the universe or nature's forces, to happiness and health, and other spiritual goals typical for the New Age milieu.<sup>11</sup>

The scholar of religion, Mircea Eliade, played a crucial role in the shift of how the term 'Shaman' is interpreted, which is still present in the Czech spiritual milieu. His ground-breaking book *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1964)<sup>12</sup> has become a bestseller and the most cited book on shamanism for many years, and for a long time, the only book translated into Czech accepted by a wider non-academic audience.<sup>13</sup> His book accommodated the discourse about shamans in the contemporary Czech shamanism as well: current shamans perceive the shaman as a master of ecstasy, who is not controlled by otherworldly powers, but who mastered them and can use them. The shaman makes direct, non-mediated contact with Eliade's "sacred".<sup>14</sup>

After the first wave of awe, many scholars revised Eliade's theories on shamanism and describe them more sceptically as Eliade's myth about shamanism or even Eliade's wishful thinking.<sup>15</sup> Eliade's suggestive literary work (in which Eliade is similar to Castaneda) showed indigenous spirituality as worthy of Western spiritual interest and allowed shamanism to be perceived as a universal and primary ("archaic") religious technique.<sup>16</sup> Eliade's successors, in their initial uncritical enthusiasm, also recognized shamanism in the history of their field.

The University of California in Los Angeles, the 'alternative spirituality Mecca of the 1960s'<sup>17</sup> was generally full of people "anxious to explore such topics as spirituality, shamanism, and altered states"; the latter being inspired by Eliade.<sup>18</sup> The anthropology department, where Castaneda studied, was no exception. This stimulating environment largely influenced Castaneda who wanted to earn his spurs.

His first three monographs about the sorcerer Don Juan became a bestseller for a time and, despite their fraudulent nature, they have been crucial for modern shamans. Why? While Eliade wanted to find spiritual redemption from the fallen Western secularism in his form of Christian mysticism,<sup>19</sup> Castaneda made the connection between

<sup>11</sup> The New Age discourse dominates the Czech alternative spiritual environment and contemporary shamanism imitates it. Therefore, there is a great deal of information about "energies", holistic approaches, etc. Cf. the term "New Age *sensu lato*" in WOUTER J. HANEGRAAFF, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, New York: State University of New York 1998, p. 98–112.

<sup>12</sup> MIRCEA ELIADE, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, New York: Bollingen Foundation 1964, 610 p.

<sup>13</sup> I have never heard my informants talking about Piers Vitebsky's or Thomas A. DuBois's monograph, although they have also been translated into Czech.

<sup>14</sup> The "sacred" in Eliade's point of view is the source of life, or a spring of meaningfulness. Cf. MIRCEA ELIADE, *The Sacred and the Profane*, New York: Harcourt 1959, 256 p.

<sup>15</sup> NOEL, *The Soul of Shamanism ...*, p. 30–34. Alternatively, KOCKU VON STUCKRAD, *The Scientification of Religion: A Historical Study of Discursive Change, 1800–2000*, Boston and Berlin: De Gruyter 2015, 225 p.

<sup>16</sup> BOEKHOVEN, *Genealogies of Shamanism*, p. 130.

<sup>17</sup> ZNAMENSKI, *The Beauty of the Primitive*, p. 195.

<sup>18</sup> Castaneda's colleagues were, for instance, Peter Furst, Barbara Myerhoff, or Carlo Ginzburg.

<sup>19</sup> ZNAMENSKI, *The Beauty of the Primitive*, p. 174

the “wise Indians” and Western seekers real: After all, if it was possible for him as a scholar, a non-native man of modern times to become a sorcerer’s apprentice, right in the backyard of his home, why not for everyone else?<sup>20</sup>

Following the example of Castaneda’s message, a whole new genre of shamanic literature with the same initiation structure has emerged: a white person who feels lost in their culture encounters an indigenous sage who shows them the foolishness of their haughtiness and reveals the truth about the world that the white person, after several failures, gradually understands. In the end, the sage explains that the apprentice is the ‘chosen one’ whose task it is to go back to their culture and spread the ancient wisdom in their homeland. In the Czech Republic, such stories are extremely popular, and authors such as Lynn Andrews, Taisha Abelar, Florinda Donner, Jeremy Narby, or Charles Hyemeyohsts Storm are widely translated. Even some contemporary shamans have adapted their life story to fit this frame.

Another key figure in forming a contemporary understanding of shamanism, Castaneda’s peer and friend Michael Harner also hit the bulls’ eye with his books. Besides, he shares with Castaneda a similar academic-shamanic career, which began with the study of hallucinogenic substances,<sup>21</sup> followed by a shift from this fascination to the creation of a “sober” methodology,<sup>22</sup> and quitting the academic career to become a spiritual leader.<sup>23</sup>

As one of the most influential authors and teachers for contemporary shamans, Michael Harner defended Castaneda continually. In response to Robert Bly’s accusation that Castaneda “ransacks” Harner’s ethnographic records of the Jivaro people, Harner protested: “Bly and de Mille are unaware that remarkable parallels exist in shamanic belief and practice thorough the primitive world.”<sup>24</sup> And he is indeed right – although only from the perspective of Eliade’s generalizing methodology only.

He stands up for Castaneda even in his most famous book *The Way of the Shaman* (1980),<sup>25</sup> which is both a book reflecting his anthropological knowledge and a practical guide on how to enter the shamanic world. Right at the beginning of this book, Harner made a statement: “The books of Carlos Castaneda, regardless of the questions that have been raised regarding their degree of fictionalization, have performed the valuable service of introducing many Westerners to the adventure and

<sup>20</sup> Note, that “the U.S. play the role of a bastion of rationality and intellectual safety, whereas Mexico is presented as a mysterious ‘camposcape’”. ZUZANA MARIE KOSTIČOVÁ, “From Academic Anthropology to Esoteric Religion: the Development of Carlos Castaneda’s Writings”, under review in *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism*. Cf. ZNAMENSKI, *The Beauty of the Primitive*, p. 206.

<sup>21</sup> In Harner’s case, the anthropological research among the Jivaro people. MICHAEL HARNER, *The Jivaro: People of the Sacred Waterfalls*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1972, 233 p.

<sup>22</sup> In Harner’s case, the drumming, in Castaneda’s case, the invention of Tensegrity.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Harner has founded in the 1987 *Foundation for Shamanic Studies*. Carlos Castaneda formed a small group of loyal adherents.

<sup>24</sup> Richard de Mille is the main debunker of Castaneda’s fraud. RICHARD DE MILLE, *The Don Juan Papers: Further Castaneda Controversies*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth 1990, p. 40.

<sup>25</sup> MICHAEL HARNER, *The Way of the Shaman: A Guide to Power and Healing*, San Francisco: Harper & Row 1980, 171 p.

excitement of shamanism and to some legitimate principles involved.”<sup>26</sup> In return, on the back cover of the same book, Castaneda sang Harner’s praises: “Wonderful, fascinating ... Harner really knows what he’s talking about.” No wonder that the basic shamanic courses of Michael Harner’s *Foundation for shamanic studies* (FSS) introduce these two as pioneer mediators of shamanic practice; a couple of men who “provide the privier view into shamanism”.<sup>27</sup>

## Carlos Castaneda and his work

Castaneda was undoubtedly a controversial man, and so all the shamans I have spoken to felt obliged to comment on Castaneda’s personality and life story. They overwhelmingly described Castaneda as a cult leader, a sectarian, a great manipulator, or simply “a weirdo” and they mostly agreed that Castaneda made his stories up. This criticism notwithstanding, they credited Castaneda with discovering the previously less travelled road. As one shaman puts it: “Whatever Castaneda was, he has built a few bridges across the unknown field, a few slabs, which were not there before. So, thanks to him we can get there because we at least have something that is described, named and we can hold it. [...] We shall thank Castaneda for that.”<sup>28</sup>

As for the literary style – some shamans found his books wordy or phantasmagorical (the descriptions of mescaline trips), although some of my respondents appreciated his “Carlitos” stylization in which a book character becomes deliberately more obtuse than any reader. According to contemporary shamans, this literary technique helped Castaneda to mediate Don Juan’s knowledge to the broader audience since there is an agreement that Castaneda possessed some actual indigenous knowledge after all. Nevertheless, Castaneda “dragged out” the whole book series needlessly. So, consequentially, none of the shamans read Castaneda’s decalogy thoroughly. In most cases, they gave up the reading by the third book (*Journey to Ixtlan*);<sup>29</sup> only one kept following Castaneda’s teachings to the fifth book (*Second Ring of Power*).<sup>30</sup>

This fact corresponds to how Castaneda usually gets reflected mark in the shamanologic academic milieu – in connection to the image of shamanism, mainly his first three monographs are mentioned: *The Teachings of Don Juan*,<sup>31</sup> *A Separate Reality*,<sup>32</sup> and *Journey to Ixtlan*. This copies the literary style and message of Castaneda’s books: from anthropological works on shamanism (or its imitation) to his mystical

<sup>26</sup> HARNER, *The Way of the Shaman*, p. xxi.

<sup>27</sup> The course “The way of the Shaman”, held by FSS on April 22.–24., 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with shaman J., May 23rd, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> CARLOS CASTANEDA, *The Journey to Ixtlan: Further Conversations with Don Juan*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1972, 268 p.

<sup>30</sup> CARLOS CASTANEDA, *The Second Ring of Power*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1977, 316 p.

<sup>31</sup> CARLOS CASTANEDA, *The Teachings of Don Juan; A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1968, 196 p.

<sup>32</sup> CARLOS CASTANEDA, *A Separate Reality: Further Conversations with Don Juan*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1971, 317 p.

teachings. The shamanic criticism of his life and lack of interest for his later books mirror this development as well.

When considering the authenticity of Castaneda's work, opinions can be divided into two categories. The first point of view is that Castaneda made it all up. One legend – as my respondent told me – goes that he was an impostor, who plagiarized Barbara Myerhoff's diploma thesis, but his fraud was exposed at the university, so he changed his mind and published this text as a novel.<sup>33</sup> The soft version of Castaneda's hoax explanation is that he might have stolen the identity of a Mexican shaman, and corrupted his teaching in many points. However, the true "native" core remains, and therefore the books are worth paying attention to – albeit with a cautious and thorough analysis.

The second point of view is that Castaneda made it all up as well. Nonetheless, the results are different. These shamans do not care about the Native American copyright, because Castaneda's works might hold true in spite of it. To understand this position, note that there is a deep consensus in the current shamanic milieu, that Eliade's and Harner's upper and lower worlds are just "layers" of this reality. This reality is perceived as multidimensional. In conclusion, Castaneda's teachings are truths from another dimension of reality. A similar rank of explanations clarifies that Castaneda channelled his teachings, which is also a valid method for obtaining information in contemporary shamanism.

Since Castaneda's books possess many questions and doubts, one must be particularly vigilant while reading them, for many things "work", but at the same time, Castaneda allegedly got tangled up in the native teachings and made the information complicated, confusing, and misleading. Therefore, these books are not recommended for shamanic beginners, and I have been urged to read Castaneda's book carefully. The books retain many useful observations, but frequently contain Castaneda's fabrications and even projections and "personal demons".

A good example of such a misinterpretation according to one shaman is the awareness of water (cf. *Separate reality*).<sup>34</sup> After a bad experience, Don Juan forbids Carlos to even come close to water, but as the shaman puts it: "One can start to fear moist hollows in the forest, because of evil spirits. But I think, in this case, it's just about Castaneda's fear; perhaps an intentionally written bogeyman ..."<sup>35</sup>

I assume that we could find one underlying cause for these ambivalent interpretations of Castaneda's legacy: Even though current shamans know about the pitfalls of Castaneda's work and are aware of his life story, his literary legacy is still too good to be rejected. The "fraudulent", "fictional" or "non-historical" character of Castaneda's work did not cause the rejection of his work, because, after all, it has no relevance to

<sup>33</sup> To correct the inconsistencies: *The Teachings* was indeed Castaneda's master's thesis. He was then awarded a Ph.D. for *Journey to Ixtlan* in 1973. Castaneda did not plagiarize; but nevertheless, he "borrowed" some motives from Myerhoff's Huichol informant.

<sup>34</sup> "He stressed that I had to avoid water and keep it from touching the surface of my body for three or four months." CASTANEDA, *A Separate Reality*, p. 180; cf p. 214.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with shaman J., May 23rd, 2018.

the shamans' needs. Religious (spiritual) life is influenced, co-created, and supported by storytelling, myths, novels, movies, art, and symbols that are touching and moving without necessarily being historically accurate. Provided that current shamanism is a religion or religious practice in the broad sense, Castaneda can be considered one of its influential sources. Considering this claim, let us have a closer look at Carlos Castaneda's literary and factual impact in the Czech shamanic environment.

## Carlos Castaneda's legacy in the current Czech shamanism

Contemporary Czech shamans<sup>36</sup> first encountered Carlos Castaneda's work very early after the fall of the Iron Curtain. In 1992, the first translation of the first book of Castaneda's decalogy was published; the famous *The Teachings of Don Juan*.<sup>37</sup> However, the significance of his books for the ethos of Czech shamanism is not as strong as in the USA. Instead, his thoughts and concepts only became better known through the work of Michael Harner and the works of Castaneda's followers, whether direct (Taisha Abelar or Florinda Donner)<sup>38</sup> or secondary ones, such as Victor Sanchez.<sup>39</sup> The list of Castaneda's apologists would not be complete without Miguel Angel Ruiz Macias's *Four Agreements*<sup>40</sup> (and its sequels)<sup>41</sup>. This book also deserves mentioning, as it has been a spiritual bestseller in the Czech Republic since its first translation in 2001.<sup>42</sup> Due to its great acclaim, the book was reprinted for the third time, and got an

<sup>36</sup> There is no historical evidence for shamanic tradition in the territory of the Czech Republic. However, the lack of historical continuity does not automatically allow us to call contemporary shamans "inauthentic". Cf. SUSANNAH CROCKFORD, "Shamanisms and the Authenticity of Religious Experience", in *Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan studies* 12 (2002): p. 139-158.

<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, this translation was more enthusiastic than professional. CARLOS CASTANEDA, *Učení dona Juana*, Praha: Reflex 1992, 187 p.

<sup>38</sup> TAISHA ABELAR, *The Sorcerers' Crossing: A Woman's Journey*, New York: Viking Arkana 1992, 252 p.; FLORINDA DONNER, *Shabono: A Visit to a Remote and Magical World in the South American Rain Forest*, New York: Delacorte Press 1982, 305 p.; FLORINDA DONNER, *The Witch's Dream: A Healer's Way of Knowledge*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1985, 287 p.; FLORINDA DONNER, *Being-in-Dreaming: An Initiation Into the Sorcerers' World*, New York: HarperCollins, 1992, 320 p.

<sup>39</sup> VICTOR SANCHEZ, *The Teachings of Don Carlos: Practical Applications of the Works of Carlos Castaneda*, Rochester: Bear & Company 1991, 229 p.

<sup>40</sup> DON MIGUEL RUIZ, *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom*, San Rafael: Amber-Allen Publishing 1997, 160 p.

<sup>41</sup> DON MIGUEL RUIZ, *The Four Agreements Companion Book: Using The Four Agreements to Master the Dream of Your Life (A Toltec Wisdom Book)*, San Rafael: Amber-Allen Publishing 2000, 224 p.; DON MIGUEL RUIZ, *The Voice of Knowledge: A Practical Guide To Inner Peace*, San Rafael, Amber-Allen Publishing 2004, 234 p.; DON MIGUEL RUIZ and DON JOSE RUIZ, *The Fifth Agreement: A Practical Guide to Self-Mastery (Toltec Wisdom)*, San Rafael: Amber-Allen Publishing 2009, 248 p.; DON MIGUEL RUIZ, *The Three Questions*, New York: HarperCollins 2018, 208 p.

<sup>42</sup> DON MIGUEL RUIZ, *Čtyři dohody: Kniha moudrosti starých Tolteků: Praktický průvodce osobní svobodou* [The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom], Hodkovičky: Pragma 2001, 135 p.

adaptation in the form of a one-man-show play by the popular actor and esotericist Jaroslav Dušek, which has been selling out for many years.<sup>43</sup>

Another influential figure is a Czech author who publishes his books under the pseudonym Gato.<sup>44</sup> In his books *Uniknout Orlovi* (To Escape the Eagle)<sup>45</sup> and *Učení Nagualů* (The Teachings of Naguals),<sup>46</sup> he summarizes Castaneda's teaching in a systematic and attractive way – albeit with some dose of romanticizing and highlighting the less-problematic passages of Castaneda's teachings and Gato's own comparison between Castaneda's teachings and Zen Buddhism.

Having a rough picture of the literary corpus Czech shamans regularly read, associate, and compare with Carlos Castaneda's work, let us move on to my shamanic respondents. All the respondents I have interviewed knew Carlos Castaneda and were familiar with his books, and many even read them. Despite this general familiarity, it should also be noted that out of the twelve respondents, only three felt the need to reflect on and evaluate Castaneda's work to a greater extent. Moreover, all three of them had had the same mentor in their shamanic beginnings, so the course of this interpretation has quite a clear motivation. For the other shamans I interviewed, Castaneda was not of a major importance in their spiritual journey. He was “merely” one of many, and this restriction will be relevant throughout the analysis.

To balance this disclaimer out, we shall also mention that all the three abovementioned shamans have been practicing shamanism for a long time and are well-known in the esoteric milieu. Moreover, during the years of their professional careers, they have managed to pass their worldview, observations, and convictions on to hundreds of course attendees, long-term students, future shamans, and clients they have treated. Their opinion is therefore not insignificant in the Czech shamanic community.

The same can be said for the importance of the above-mentioned authors, who wrote their books under Castaneda's literary influence (i.e. Sanchez, Abelar, Ruiz, Gato). Harner's *FSS* also held their seminars in the Czech Republic and Harner's vision of shamanism has significantly impacted the Czech audience, spreading the positive image of Castaneda presented by this organization.

Finally, the impact of the abovementioned “meta-tutor” is not negligible as well, since she was the main and first active shamanic influencer in the Czech Republic,

<sup>43</sup> Local newspapers reported that tickets for the performance were sold illegally for four times the usual price. FILIP JAROŠEVSKÝ, “Jaroslav Dušek a Čtyři dohody jdou proti překupníkům lístků” [online], *Metro.cz*, 18. 1. 2018, [1. 9. 2019] available online at [https://www.metro.cz/jaroslav-dusek-a-ctyri-dohody-jdou-proti-prekupnikum-listku-p51-/spolecnost.aspx?c=A180117\\_175703\\_metro-spolecnost\\_jsk](https://www.metro.cz/jaroslav-dusek-a-ctyri-dohody-jdou-proti-prekupnikum-listku-p51-/spolecnost.aspx?c=A180117_175703_metro-spolecnost_jsk).

<sup>44</sup> The same person translated Harner's *The Way of the Shaman* into Czech. MICHAEL HARNER, *Cesta šamana: jak probudit svůj vnitřní potenciál* [The Way of the Shaman: A Guide to Power and Healing], Praha: DharmaGaia 2010, 204 p.

<sup>45</sup> GATO, *Uniknout Orlovi: čarodějné učení dona Juana v devíti knihách Carlose Castanedy* [To Escape the Eagle: Magical Teaching of don Juan in Nine Books of Carlos Castaneda], Brno: Ohnisko 1994, 53 p.

<sup>46</sup> GATO, *Učení Nagualů: z knih Carlose Castanedy, Florindy Donnerové, Taishy Abelarové a vlastních zkušeností* [The Teachings of Naguals: from Carlos Castaneda's, Florinda Donner's, and Taisha Abelar's Books and My Own Experiences], Praha: DharmaGaia 1999, 165 p.

mainly in the 1990s.<sup>47</sup> She brought up the whole first generation of current professional shamans, and countless people have passed through her courses over the twenty-five years of her practice.

Considering the impact of Castaneda's legacy, let us focus more precisely on the similarities and differences of Castaneda's perspective and the shamanic worldview, starting with the similarities and prevalent ethos, complemented with the renounced parts of Castaneda's work, and finishing with the famed teaching about "dreaming and stalking", and its current use in a shamanic context.

## Shared ethos and objectionable teachings

### The living nature and shamans' allies

Contemporary Czech shamanism is, amongst other things,<sup>48</sup> massively influenced by environmentalism (stressing the importance of the nature and environmental sustainability), current pagan traditions (stressing the ritual practice), and the discourse of the New Age milieu; all of which co-create the shamanic worldview. The esoteric cosmology teaching that an all-penetrating energy intertwines with everything is omnipresent in shamanism.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, contemporary shamans share the idea, that this world (with all its layers and energies pervading from the universe into the psyche) is alive and talks to us. We should therefore pay attention to the voices of the world. Shamans share this concept with Castaneda; especially the listening to the bird-guides, to whom Castaneda also tried to listen during his apprenticeship.<sup>50</sup>

As a result of this philosophy, many shamans offer "accompanied journeys". These pilgrimages consist of wandering across the land with clients. The shaman listens to the client and draws their attention to the "nods of nature"<sup>51</sup> – the wind blowing, significant places in the countryside, the birds singing, or the direction, the wind is coming from, etc.; much in the same way as Don Juan did with Carlos.

The nature, in the current shamanic point of view, is not only listening to our thoughts or feelings; it is also patient, helpful, and frank; it is the Mother Earth. Furthermore, there are no malevolent beings in this world, or their number is only marginal.<sup>52</sup> The same holds true for shamans' allies, i.e., power animals, shamans' helping spirits. They are friendly fellows, sincere mentors, and guides through the other worlds. All current shamans identify with Michael Harner's teaching that the

<sup>47</sup> This "meta-tutor" is currently involved in establishing a small community of adherents. She does not give interviews and wants to stay out of the media (note the similarity to Carlos Castaneda).

<sup>48</sup> Concepts such as karma, aura, Stanislav Grof's holotropic breathwork, homeopathy, etc.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. EXNEROVÁ, *Šamanismus v rozhovorech*, p. 69–70 (chap. "Energie a práce s ní" [Energy and the work with it]).

<sup>50</sup> CASTANEDA, *A Separate Reality*, p. 160.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with shaman I., June 26th, 2018.

<sup>52</sup> Those rare malignant beings are not evil in their nature – either they are beyond our moral concepts since they came from far away, or their behaviour is a result of their suffering – they cannot act differently, but there is a chance to help them.

shaman's ally is always helpful and kind. At the initial seminars of the *FSS*, the power animal is the first thing the future shamans seeks. It usually comes to the course participant peacefully and they have a polite conversation. The atmosphere is similar to Castaneda's coyote experience.<sup>53</sup> But Don Juan explained to Carlos that he met a luminous being, but certainly not an ally.

Gaining an ally is the sorcerer's final exam in Castaneda's world and it is not easy to pass. The ally will "tackle"<sup>54</sup> the apprentice. They will "spin" and "trill",<sup>55</sup> and finally the ally has to be "beaten down".<sup>56</sup> This perception lies in sharp contrast with the world of current shamanism, in which obtaining an ally is one of the first achievements. However, this is not the first difference between Castaneda's cosmology and that of the current shamans. First and foremost, Castaneda teaches his readers that the world is a dangerous place where enemies are lurking around every corner, and the presence of death is incessant. This attitude is similar to the world of Siberian shamans. The fact that everything is alive stands for "We are surrounded by enemies".<sup>57</sup> The beings that live in our world are of a predator-ish nature; there is no space for negotiation left. Therefore, Don Juan teaches Carlos how to protect himself and fight against these forces creeping around the Sonoran Desert. Even though the world is a hostile place to live, in his books Castaneda is sometimes moved by its breath-taking beauty. However, this is more an existentialist position conscious of the fragility and transience of every moment, rather than the ingenuous confidence of contemporary shamans.

### **The shaman's image and purpose**

In the next step, Castaneda destroys the romanticizing image of the shaman as a non-selfish (beyond selfish) being, which cures, helps, and navigates clients, teaching them how to live a happy life, how to shed the burdens of past, or how to give their life a meaningful narrative. Castaneda's shaman is a lone warrior, unbound from the nets of relationship. That cannot pass unnoticed. As one shaman puts it: "This is one great weakness of Castaneda's; that he made the outer world evil. Until you have a sword, don't you dare go out; be a brawler from the very beginning. That implies a dispute from the beginning."<sup>58</sup> Instead of this model, this shaman suggests an "adventurer archetype". This adventurer does not prevent an argument by a hook or a crook, because they are entering the unknown landscapes of their own consciousness and other realities. However, while doing so, they enter these realms with humility, friendliness, and responsibility for their actions.

<sup>53</sup> CASTANEDA, *Journey to Ixtlan*, p. 250–252.

<sup>54</sup> CASTANEDA, *Journey to Ixtlan*, p. 250–252.

<sup>55</sup> CASTANEDA, *Journey to Ixtlan*, p. 197.

<sup>56</sup> CASTANEDA, *Journey to Ixtlan*, p. 197.

<sup>57</sup> RONALD HUTTON, *Shamans: Siberian Spirituality and the Western Imagination*, London: Hambleton Continuum 2007, p. 60–61.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with shaman J., May 23rd, 2018.

The aim of the warrior's alienation is evident in Castaneda's opus: There is supposedly a force in this world, called the Eagle, which controls human fate and consumes the human consciousness in the moment of death. The shaman is directed to accumulate enough power to escape from Eagle and not lose consciousness, at any cost. The way of shaman is, therefore, demanding, dangerous, and self-centred.

Moreover, in Castaneda's perspective, this shaman-warrior is the chosen one. The sorcerer, the nagual, or the warrior is able to recognize another being of their kind by emanating an inner light. The future shamans do not choose their way willingly. On the contrary, the shamanic teacher has to seduce them, entice them. "I've told you already, only a crackpot would undertake the task of becoming a man of knowledge of his own accord. A sober-headed man has to be tricked into doing it."<sup>59</sup> They compare the willing aspirants to "leaking gourds".

What a stark contrast to modern Czech shamanism. The ambiance is democratic and inclusive: everyone is welcome to join the courses and try the shamanic techniques and combine them with previously acquired knowledge. Shamanic seekers come to these courses on their own, willingly paying considerable amounts of money. In Castaneda's terms, contemporary shamanism would be full of gourds.

Today's shamans find Castaneda's approach quite harsh in many points and their criticism usually means contradicting his claims as in the following citation: "There was never a black Eagle, which would swallow people. It doesn't exist. It's just trumped up. [...] The principle of accumulation [of power] is not shamanic; the core of shamanism is cooperation."<sup>60</sup> Michael Harner was not enthused by Castaneda's concept of the crude nature of shamanism as well, since he focused predominantly on healing methods. Nevertheless, once again, he excused Castaneda's ideas. According to him, Castaneda was only describing the "warrior (or sorcerer) type of shamanism".<sup>61</sup>

### **Shaman's responsibility and neutral Power**

To focus more on the ethos which unites these two quite distinctive worlds, let us take note of two elements: the absolute responsibility for one own's fate and the nature of the world. The first statement is represented by pervasive assertions that a man creates his own destiny. The participants of shamanic courses are encouraged to stress that they are exactly where they are meant to be in their lives; or where they have caused themselves to be. Taking full responsibility for one's state of affairs is also the first step to initiating the treatment.

Castaneda accentuates this facet as well, although in a blunter style. Don Juan keeps mocking Carlos for his weakness, lack of tenacity, and self-pity. He agrees with many contemporary shamans: "You are here, with me, because you want to be here. You should have assumed full responsibility by now, so the idea that you are at the mercy of the wind would be inadmissible."<sup>62</sup>

<sup>59</sup> CASTANEDA, *A Separate Reality*, p. 18.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with shaman I., June 26th, 2018.

<sup>61</sup> HARNER, *The Way of the Shaman*, p. XXI.

<sup>62</sup> CASTANEDA, *Journey to Ixtlan*, p. 92.

The final topic we will focus on is the nature of the world. The previously mentioned comparison of the nature of Castaneda's perspective and the shamanic worldview shows that they are rife with contradictions. While Castaneda's world is hostile, the shamanic world is affable; while Castaneda's way of the sorcerer is an elite, debilitating commitment, the way of the current shaman aims to be for anyone, comfortably-and-open-accessed. While Castaneda's archetype is the warrior, the shamanic ideal is a discoverer, an adventurer, and a healer; while gaining the ally is a brawl for Castaneda, current shamans see it as the earliest goal, etc.

Despite the impression that these worlds could not be more different, I presume that their nature is at least in some points similar. Let me justify this claim more accurately. The worlds of Castaneda and modern Czech shamans manifest contradictorily, although it could be seen as a mere by-product of a similar nature, which is *neutral*. The Eagle, hostile spirits, the malevolent intentions of other sorcerers are not personal in the strict sense in Castaneda's world. These malevolent beings are far from judging or punishing anybody. They do not desire to settle the bill.

The same is true for the contemporary shamanic worldview. Its cosmology might seem more positive, even naïve with all the overwhelming love of Mother Nature and other cosmic beings, but the all-penetrating energy is neutral as well. Our cosmos is formed by a neutral, impersonal power, which can be charged by positive or negative deeds. That corresponds with the shamanic ability to change the reality and the "cosmic responsibility" for one's fate. Subsequently, the rules are set out in both cases, and both the modern shaman and Castaneda's sorcerer work by the book.

As one shaman summarize this: "I am interested in Toltecs because every religion or religious system has a being, which really cares about them, helps them, does matter. Whereas Toltecs are the first ones, I've encountered, who say: 'But he does not matter. It is a power by itself. It does not give a damn. Either you will play by following its rules, and you will protect yourself, or you won't and then tough luck for you.'"<sup>63</sup>

## Conclusion

Even though, Carlos Castaneda is accepted as an essential figure in shamanic print culture,<sup>64</sup> current Czech shamans are more impressed by his sorcerer's apprentice story, than his specific teachings or advice. They differ from him in many perspectives on central shamanic terms; in behaviour and the way they explore the shamanic world; and in the degree of participation on shamanic practices. Today's shamans have refused many cornerstones of Castaneda's teaching, and left many of them unnoticed (for instance, the tonal-nagual dichotomy<sup>65</sup> or the art of stopping the

<sup>63</sup> Interview with shaman V., July 12th, 2018.

<sup>64</sup> ZNAMENSKI, *The Beauty of the primitive*, p. 200ff.

<sup>65</sup> The whole second part of CARLOS CASTANEDA, *Tales of Power*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1974, 278 p.

world<sup>66</sup>). Although the nature of the world is comparable in both cases and they share the concept that the individual is a creator of their own destiny, the mood and approach differ considerably.

A good, self-explanatory example of the real form of Carlos Castaneda's legacy is the case of dreaming and stalking, the cornerstones of Castaneda's shamanic universe. Castaneda describes dreaming as a technique of controlling attention, or more specifically as a technique of controlling dreams. Don Juan encourages Carlos to learn to concentrate on his hands while dreaming and then gradually widen that view until he can travel in dreams and master the overall situation of the dream.<sup>67</sup> This technique aims to create a "double" who can "accomplish feats that would be unimaginable under ordinary terms".<sup>68</sup>

Stalking is another sorcerer's skill. A stalker traces the strength.<sup>69</sup> Stalking requires flawless observation of the world's order which leads to mastering every situation by seven rules. The stalker also masters a method of recapitulation, which is actually stalking oneself. By re-actualizing and realizing every single moment, the stalker can create a substitution for his consciousness: "since awareness is the Eagle's food, the Eagle can be satisfied with a perfect recapitulation in place of consciousness".<sup>70</sup> That is how the stalker escapes the Eagle's talons.

To sum up, these two methods are obviously rooted in more complex teachings, linked, connected, and explicated for some purpose. Contemporary shamans, however, simplified, decontextualized, and twisted the dreaming and stalking method completely, while simultaneously referencing Castaneda's legacy and his alleged "indigenous" insight.

In a nutshell, in current shamanism dreaming means a conscious entry into a changed state of consciousness, mainly the trance, which is induced by meditation or drumming. Harner does not recommend sleeping, as it is not easy to flee from a dream.<sup>71</sup> And stalking equals thinking. One of my respondents described stalking in the following way: "Shamanic dreaming is actually about going somewhere to find something out or to carry out something. Also, what is happening there is, in 99.9% of all cases, on a symbolic level. I get a piece of clear, accurate information, but it's not straightforward. To understand the message, I have to examine it. And that's stalking. In our culture, we would call it thinking about things. It means using our mind."<sup>72</sup> Simply put, the current Czech shamanic environment sees dreaming as a mere visualization method and stalking as an analysis of this visualization.

This example stands as a final *pars pro toto* of Castaneda's legacy in contemporary Czech shamanism. Shamans have adopted many motifs, set phrases, and the main line

<sup>66</sup> CASTANEDA, *Journey to Ixtlan*, p. 111.

<sup>67</sup> CASTANEDA, *Tales of Power*, p. 11.

<sup>68</sup> CASTANEDA, *Tales of Power*, p. 45.

<sup>69</sup> CASTANEDA, *The Second Ring of Power*, p. 227-228.

<sup>70</sup> CARLOS CASTANEDA, *The Eagle's Gift*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1981, p. 234.

<sup>71</sup> HARNER, *The Way of the Shaman*, p. XX.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with shaman I., June 26th, 2018.

of narration, but they are far from being literal or exact in the implementation. Their spirituality is made-to-measure, and Castaneda's existentialist struggle does not cause any great sentiments.

## REFERENCES

### PRIMARY SOURCES

- ABELAR, TAISHA, *The Sorcerers' Crossing: A Woman's Journey*, New York: Viking Arkana 1992, 252 p.
- CASTANEDA, CARLOS, *A Separate Reality: Further Conversations with Don Juan*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1971, 317 p.
- CASTANEDA, CARLOS, *Tales of Power*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1974, 278 p.
- CASTANEDA, CARLOS, *The Eagle's Gift*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1981, 316 p.
- CASTANEDA, CARLOS, *The Journey to Ixtlan: Further Conversations with Don Juan*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1972, 268 p.
- CASTANEDA, CARLOS, *The Second Ring of Power*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1977, 316 p.
- CASTANEDA, CARLOS, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1968, 196 p.
- CASTANEDA, CARLOS, *Učení dona Juana* [The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge], Praha: Reflex 1992, 187 p.
- DONNER, FLORINDA, *Being-in-Dreaming: An Initiation Into the Sorcerers' World*, New York: HarperCollins 1992, 320 p.
- DONNER, FLORINDA, *Shabono: A Visit to a Remote and Magical World in the South American Rain Forest*, New York: Delacorte Press 1982, 305 p.
- DONNER, FLORINDA, *The Witch's Dream: A Healer's Way of Knowledge*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1985, 287 p.
- ELIADE, MIRCEA, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, New York: Bollingen Foundation 1964, 610 p.
- ELIADE, MIRCEA, *The Sacred and the Profane*, New York: Harcourt 1959, 256 p.
- GATO, *Uniknout Orlovi: Čarodějně učení dona Juana v devíti knihách Carlose Castanedy* [To Escape the Eagle: Magical Teaching of Don Juan in Nine Books of Carlos Castaneda], Brno: Ohnisko 1994, 53 p.
- GATO, *Učení Nagualů: Z knih Carlose Castanedy, Florindy Donnerové, Taishy Abelarové a vlastních zkušeností* [The Teachings of Naguals: from Carlos Castaneda's, Florinda Donner's, and Taisha Abelar's Books and My Own Experiences], Praha: DharmaGaia 1999, 165 p.
- HARNER, MICHAEL, *Cesta šamana: Jak probudit svůj vnitřní potenciál* [The Way of the Shaman: A Guide to Power and Healing], Praha: DharmaGaia 2010, 204 p.
- HARNER, MICHAEL, *The Jivaro: People of the Sacred Waterfalls*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1972, 233 p.
- HARNER, MICHAEL, *The Way of the Shaman: A Guide to Power and Healing*, San Francisco: Harper & Row 1980, 171 p.
- JAROŠEVSKÝ, FILIP, "Jaroslav Dušek a Čtyři dohody jdou proti překupníkům lístků" [Jaroslav Dušek and The Four Agreements Intervene against Scalpers][online], *Metro.cz*, 18. 1. 2018, accessed 1. 9. 2019, available online at [https://www.metro.cz/jaroslav-dusek-a-ctyri-dohody-jdou-proti-prekupnikum-listku-p51-/spolecnost.aspx?c=A180117\\_175703\\_metro-spolecnost\\_jsk](https://www.metro.cz/jaroslav-dusek-a-ctyri-dohody-jdou-proti-prekupnikum-listku-p51-/spolecnost.aspx?c=A180117_175703_metro-spolecnost_jsk).
- RUIZ, DON MIGUEL, and DON JOSÉ RUIZ, *The Fifth Agreement: A Practical Guide to Self-Mastery (Toltec Wisdom)*, San Rafael: Amber-Allen Publishing 2009, 248 p.

- RUIZ, DON MIGUEL, *Čtyři dohody: Kniha moudrosti starých Tolteků: Praktický průvodce osobní svobodou* [The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom], Hodkovičky: Pragma 2001, 135 p.
- RUIZ, DON MIGUEL, *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom*, San Rafael: Amber-Allen Publishing 1997, 160 p.
- RUIZ, DON MIGUEL, *The Four Agreements Companion Book: Using The Four Agreements to Master the Dream of Your Life (A Toltec Wisdom Book)*, San Rafael: Amber-Allen Publishing 2000, 224 p.
- RUIZ, DON MIGUEL, *The Three Questions*, New York: HarperCollins 2018, 208 p.
- RUIZ, DON MIGUEL, *The Voice of Knowledge: A Practical Guide To Inner Peace*, San Rafael: Amber-Allen Publishing 2004, 234 p.
- SANCHEZ, VICTOR, *The Teachings of Don Carlos: Practical Applications of the Works of Carlos Castaneda*, Rochester: Bear & Company 1991, 229 p.

#### SECONDARY SOURCES

- BOEKHOVEN, JEROEN W., *Genealogies of Shamanism: Struggles for Power, Charisma and Authority*, Groningen: Barkhuis 2011, 383 p.
- CROCKFORD, SUSANNAH, "Shamanisms and the Authenticity of Religious Experience", *Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan studies* 12 (2, 2010): p. 139–158.
- DE MILLE, RICHARD, *The Don Juan Papers: Further Castaneda Controversies*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth 1990, 529 p.
- EXNEROVÁ, HELENA, *Český šamanismus v rozhovorech* [Czech Shamanism in Dialogues], Praha: Dingir 2018, 228 p.
- HANEGRAAFF, WOUTER J., *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, New York: State University of New York 1998, 580 p.
- HUTTON, RONALD, *Shamans: Siberian Spirituality and the Western Imagination*, London: Hambledon Continuum 2007, 220 p.
- KEHOE, ALICE BECK, *Shamans and Religion: An Anthropological Exploration in Critical Thinking*, Long Grove: Waveland Press 2000, 125 p.
- KOSTIČOVÁ, ZUZANA MARIE, "From Academic Anthropology to Esoteric Religion: The Development of Carlos Castaneda's Writings", under review in *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism*.
- NEŠPOR, ZDENĚK, and OLGA NEŠPOROVÁ, "Religion: An Unsolved Problem for the Modern Czech Nation", *Czech Sociological Review* 45 (6, 2009): p. 1215–1237.
- NOEL, DANIEL C., *The Soul of the Shamanism: Western Fantasies, Imaginal Realities*, New York: Continuum 1997, 252 p.
- PHARO, LARS KIRKHUSMO, "A Methodology for a Deconstruction and Reconstruction of the Concepts 'Shaman' and 'Shamanism'", *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions* 58 (1, 2011): p. 6–70.
- STUCKRAD, KOCKU VON, *The Scientification of Religion: a Historical Study of Discursive Change, 1800–2000*, Boston and Berlin: De Gruyter 2014, 225 p.
- WALLIS, ROBERT J., *Shamans/Neo-shamans: Ecstasy, Alternative Archaeologies and Contemporary Pagans*, London and New York: Routledge 2003, p. 306.
- ZNAMENSKI, ANDREI A., *The Beauty of the Primitive: Shamanism and the Western Imagination*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007, 434 p.

# Healing by Fiction: Carlos Castaneda in the Context of Neo-Shamanism and Psychotherapy

Matyáš Müller

<https://doi.org/10.14712/25704893.2020.2>

**Abstract:** Carlos Castaneda is famous for the series of books about his shamanistic apprenticeship and, subsequently, mastery. As an author, however, he seems to be resisting any categorization as he has been moving on the borders of ethnography, fiction and esoterism. This article aims to assess his possible contribution to psychotherapeutic theory and practice. Castaneda is considered one of the fathers of the neo-shamanistic movement that seems to be linked to some schools of Western psychotherapy in many ways. However, he does not display many of its typical characteristics. While neo-shamanism tends to emphasize positive aspects of the world, harmony and healing, Castaneda emphasizes contemplating the “dark side of the world” and his approach contains a lot of dangerous and potentially psychologically disruptive techniques. Castaneda is thus probably less convenient for psychotherapeutic use than some of his followers. Despite that, some elements of his work seem to have a psychotherapeutic potential and they have not been left unnoticed in the psychotherapeutic community. I emphasize two specific elements of his work to be key in this respect: narrativity and direct bodily experience. Castaneda’s ambiguous position at the borders of genres thus can serve us to perceive their permeability at the one hand but also to remind us of the importance of keeping them apart on the other hand.

**Keywords:** Carlos Castaneda; Neo-Shamanism; Psychotherapy; Body; Narrative

**Abstrakt:** Carlos Castaneda je známý sérií knih o svém šamanistickém učednictví a později mistrovství. Jakožto autora však není snadné jej kategorizovat: pohyboval se na hranicích etnografie, fikce a esoterismu. Tento článek má za cíl zhodnotit jeho potenciální přínos k psychotherapeutické teorii a praxi. Castaneda je považován za jednoho z otců neošamanistického hnutí, u něhož bývá poukazováno na mnohé styčné body s některými proudy západní psychoterapie. U samotného Castanedy mnohé z jeho typických charakteristik nenajdeme. Zatímco neošamanismus má tendenci zdůrazňovat pozitivní aspekty světa, harmonii a léčení, Castaneda zdůrazňuje vnímání „temné strany světa“ a jeho přístup obsahuje mnoho potenciálně nebezpečných a psychologicky narušujících technik. Castaneda je tedy z hlediska využitelnosti pro psychoterapii méně vhodný než mnozí jeho následovníci. Přesto se zdá, že některé prvky jeho práce mají psychotherapeutický potenciál a v psychotherapeutické komunitě nezůstaly zcela bez povšimnutí. Ve článku zdůrazňuji zejména dva prvky jeho práce jako obzvláště důležité v tomto ohledu: narativitu a důraz na tělesnou zkušenost. Castanedova těžko uchopitelná pozice na pomezí žánrů nám tak může na jedné straně posloužit k nahlédnutí jejich propustnosti, ale na druhé straně nám může též pomoci k nahlédnutí důležitosti jejich oddělenosti.

**Klíčová slova:** Carlos Castaneda; neošamanismus; psychoterapie; tělesnost; narativ

*Received:* 3 October 2019, *Accepted:* 10 January 2020

*Published online:* 2 October 2020

**Matyáš Müller**, National Institute of Mental Health, Czech Republic

E-mail: [matyas.muller@nudz.cz](mailto:matyas.muller@nudz.cz)

© 2020 The Author. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>).

## Carlos Castaneda in the context of traditional Shamanism and Neo-Shamanism

Carlos Castaneda was an American author who wrote a series of 12 books describing his shamanic apprenticeship under the tutelage of an alleged Yaqui *brujo*, or more specifically ‘man of knowledge’, called Don Juan. The character of the first ethnographically aimed books differs wildly from his late work which presents a systematized magico-religious teaching. To put it very simply, the system describes techniques that can be used by a specially trained “warrior” in order for them to retain their consciousness after death. Castaneda was moving at the edge of several fields and genres and his work has long oscillated between the categories of fiction and fact in bookstores. Having gained his doctorate in anthropology for the third of his books,<sup>1</sup> he presented himself as a scientist who reveals an authentic indigenous form of shamanism or sorcery.<sup>2</sup> He stood in opposition to the movements of hippies, counter-culture, and the New Age<sup>3</sup> as he understood it and to promoters of psychedelic substances such as Timothy Leary.<sup>4</sup> However, the ethnographic authenticity of his work has been questioned by a number of anthropologists and other authors and it is generally considered a hoax within the academic world.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> CARLOS CASTANEDA, *Journey to Ixtlan*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1972, *passim*.

<sup>2</sup> CHRISTOPHE BOURSEILLER, *Carlos Castaneda, pravda lži, životopis*, Praha: Volvox Globator 2006, *passim* (originally published as CHRISTOPHE BOURSEILLER, *La vérité du mensonge*, Paris: Editions du Rocher 2005, 264 p.). See also CARLOS CASTANEDA, *Čtenáři nekonečna* [Readers of Infinity], Praha: Dobra 2004, *passim*. The Czech book is a compilation of various Castaneda’s texts mainly published in 1996 in *A Journal of Applied Hermeneutics*. An archive of the original articles is available online at [https://archive.org/stream/carloscastaneda/Carlos%20Castaneda%20books/Carlos%20Castaneda%20-%20A%20Journal%20Of%20Applied\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/carloscastaneda/Carlos%20Castaneda%20books/Carlos%20Castaneda%20-%20A%20Journal%20Of%20Applied_djvu.txt).

<sup>3</sup> The term New Age is difficult to define. On the one hand, some definitions see it as a relatively unified movement, or rather a broader zeitgeist, with specific characteristics. See e.g. PAUL HEELAS, *The New Age Movement: Religion, Culture and Society in the Age of Postmodernity*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 1996, *passim*. On the other hand, there are voices that see it as a label that conflates mutually unrelated beliefs, see GEORGE D. CHRYSIDES, “Defining the New Age”, in DAREN KEMP and JAMES R. LEWIS (eds.), *Handbook of New Age*, Boston: Brill 2007, pp. 5–24; STEVEN SUTCLIFFE, *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices*, London and New York: Routledge 2002, 195. Bearing in mind that from the point of view of ethnography, the term can be too generalizing and indeed essentializing, I still use it in a broad manner as an umbrella term. If its eclectic character is one of the defining traits of the supposed movement, Castaneda clearly departs from it in that he (in the words of Don Juan) refuses to compare and combine the Don Juan’s teachings with any other spiritual tradition, as exemplified in the dialog of the two men about parallels with Tibetan Buddhism. See CARLOS CASTANEDA, *A Separate Reality: Further Conversations with Don Juan*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1971, p. 234–235.

<sup>4</sup> Whom he even called “the king of trolls”; see BOURSEILLER, *Carlos Castaneda*, p. 84. On the other hand, Castaneda was praised within the American counter-culture and, at least to some degree, by Leary himself, see TIMOTHY LEARY, *Flashbacks: A Personal and Cultural History of an Era: An Autobiography*, New York: Tarcher 1990, p. 164, 337, 392.

<sup>5</sup> RICHARD DE MILLE, *Castaneda’s Journey*, Santa Barbara: Capra Press 1976, *passim*; WESTON LA BARRE, “Stinging Criticism from the Author of The Peyote Cult”, in: DANIEL C. NOEL (ed.), *Seeing Castaneda: Reactions to the “Don Juan” Writings of Carlos Castaneda*, New York: Putnam 1976, p. 40–42; JANE H. KELLEY, *Yaqui Women: Contemporary Life Histories*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1978, p. 24–25. For summary see BOURSEILLER, *Carlos Castaneda, passim*; DANIEL

Although Castaneda has *de facto* deceived his readers, the postmodern cultural milieu made it possible for his work to be appraised despite or even for its very origin in fiction.<sup>6</sup> Castaneda himself often talks about the world being constructed by the way we talk about it and claims the consensual reality we take for granted is mere fiction. And conversely, fiction is reality for him. This means that Castaneda embodies the content of his theory by its form – for him, the very fact of “deception” represents a creative act of constructing a new reality.<sup>7</sup> Similarly to what his teacher Don Juan taught him, Castaneda teaches his readers that they should not stick too strictly to the rigid notion of reality. According to this view, the question of whether Don Juan was or was not a ‘real man’ is missing the point in the same way that ‘Carlos’ – Carlos is the young Castaneda of his early work – questions about whether he really flew after having used a psychoactive drug or whether it was happening just in his mind.<sup>8</sup>

Whether we agree with this kind of a philosophy or not, we have to admit that Carlos Castaneda was a very influential cultural figure and he has been praised by many for bringing Shamanism back to the Western world, and thus becoming one of the fathers of what is now referred to as Neo-Shamanism.<sup>9</sup> Trying to go beyond the mere appropriation of exotic traditions, Daniel Noel interprets Castaneda from a Jungian perspective as one of the sources of an authentic Euro-American Shamanism for his rehabilitation of imagination and fantasy as opposed to the notion of ‘objective reality’ that has been prevalent in the last centuries.<sup>10</sup>

Having said that Castaneda was a father of Neo-Shamanism, we also have to note that he was not a typical representative of this movement either. In order to support this statement, let us name some of the basic differences between traditional Shamanism and Neo-Shamanism. First, “traditional Shamanism” is usually practiced as a service for the community while Neo-Shamanism tends to be practiced as an individual spiritual journey or individual healing.<sup>11</sup> Traditional Shamanism involves a large scale of activities bound to very specific practical, mythical-ritual, and healing needs of the community. Apart from healing as such, it can involve rituals that aim to

---

C. NOEL, *Seeing Castaneda, passim*; STEPHEN O. MURRAY, “The Scientific Reception of Castaneda”, *Contemporary Sociology* 8 (2, 1979): p. 189–192.

<sup>6</sup> CHARLOTTE E. HARDMAN, “‘He May Be Lying But What He Says Is True’: The Sacred Tradition of Don Juan as Reported by Carlos Castaneda, Anthropologist, Trickster, Guru, Allegorist”, in JAMES R. LEWIS and OLAV HAMMER (eds.), *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*, New York: Cambridge University Press 2007, p. 38–55.

<sup>7</sup> See DANIEL C. NOEL, *The Soul of Shamanism: Western Fantasies, Imaginal Realities*, New York: Continuum 1997, p. 51.

<sup>8</sup> With don Juan replying “Birds fly like birds and a man who has taken the devil’s weed flies as such”, see CARLOS CASTANEDA, *The Teachings of Don Juan*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press 1998, p. 101.

<sup>9</sup> MICHAEL HARNER, *Castaneda Controversy – Michael Harner’s Reply* [online], 1978, accessed January 2020, available online at <https://web.archive.org/web/20170916140115/https://documents.mx/documents/castaneda-controversy-michael-harners-reply.html>.

<sup>10</sup> NOEL, *The Soul of Shamanism, passim*.

<sup>11</sup> JUAN SCURO and ROBIN RODD, “Neo-Shamanism”, in *Encyclopedia of Latin American Religions*, [New York]: Springer 2014, p. 1–6.

secure an abundance of animals for hunting.<sup>12</sup> Given that these kinds of activities lose their meaning in the context of modern urban life, there is a considerable difference between the two versions of Shamanism.<sup>13</sup>

This points to another important difference: while traditional shamanistic practice serves a specific community and contains specific, otherwise unintelligible elements, Neo-Shamanism, following a more general New Age trend, strives for universality – this is most explicitly embodied in Michael Harner’s ‘Core Shamanism’.<sup>14</sup> It is looking for the essence that is common to all shamanistic practices and rejects those cultural elements that are considered specific and nonessential.<sup>15</sup> Ironically, this effort to find a universal core of various spiritual traditions is very typical for modern and postmodern Euro-American culture.

There is also a sort of democratization of initiation present in Neo-Shamanism – it can be practiced by anyone who reads about it or visits the workshops. In contrast, one is usually chosen by the spirits or the community in traditional Shamanism. We should also note that this choice is often far from voluntary and desired – before becoming a shaman, one typically undergoes some drastic and traumatic event that is followed with ‘shamanic sickness’, often entailing extreme and painful states during which the old person dies and the shaman is born.<sup>16</sup> Every single shamanic act, for example the shamanic flight, is then often associated with pain and suffering.<sup>17</sup>

This brings us to another point of departure – a tendency to deny negative phenomena, evil, and fear, which is typical for Neo-Shamanism and that copies the ethos of the New Age movement more generally.<sup>18</sup> Evil is often interpreted as an absence of knowledge, and the goal should be to understand and integrate entities that seem evil

<sup>12</sup> KNUD RASMUSSEN, *Grónské mýty a pověsti* [The Myths and Legends of Greenland], Praha: Argo 1998, p. 303.

<sup>13</sup> We should note that the term shamanism is in itself sometimes criticized for encompassing an overly broad set of practices and beliefs that are in fact very disparate, see JANE MONNIG ATKINSON, “Shamanisms Today”, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21 (1, 1992): p. 307–330. Following on this, we should bear in mind that the mentioned delineation of the two version of shamanism is not absolute either. Whether we see both traditional Shamanism and Neo-Shamanism as a huge and disparate set of practices that cannot be captured by these two terms, or as specific manifestation of some archetypal pattern, we can find an emphasis on healing that goes beyond the needs of an individual in both versions. When stating that Neo-Shamanism is more individualistic, this can be also seen from the other side – that it is trying to transcend the traditional European individualism.

<sup>14</sup> MICHAEL M. HARNER, *The Way of the Shaman*, San Francisco and New York: Harper One 1990, *passim*.

<sup>15</sup> For this reason, it is sometimes criticized for representing a new form of cultural imperialism – stealing traditions from indigenous contexts and exporting back a universalized Western version of shamanism, see e. g. GEARY HOBSON, “The Rise of the White Shaman as a New Version of Cultural Imperialism”, in GEARY HOBSON (ed.), *The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature*, Albuquerque: Red Earth Press 1978, p. 100–108.

<sup>16</sup> The typical image described by Eliade is dismemberment of the body, see MIRCEA ELIADE, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, London: Penguin 1964, p. 50.

<sup>17</sup> RASMUSSEN, *Grónské mýty a pověsti*, p. 303.

<sup>18</sup> MICHAEL YORK, “The Role of Fear in Traditional and Contemporary Shamanism” [online], 2002, accessed September 2019, available online at <http://www.michaelyork.co.uk/Domus/CV/confpapers/cp-28.html>.

and are feared, instead of fighting and defeating them. Contrary to this, traditional Shamanism entails a great deal of suffering, fear, and pain. The shaman encounters entities whose evil cannot be denied, and they have to fight and defeat them. The spirits they encounter may be tricksters, dangerous for the unprepared.

Analogically, while in the context of modern Shamanism, negative emotions such as blame and shame are put aside, in the traditional version, blame, sin, and reconciliation of the spirits and gods play an important part. We can take the wrath of the Mother of the Sea, a common topic in the Greenland Inuit mythology, as an example. According to the myths, human sins get stuck in her hair in the form of excrements. She then punishes mankind by not sending enough animals. In this case, the shaman has to visit her and comb the excrements out from her hair. Last but not least, while the shaman is usually seen as a positive and harmonizing figure within Neo-Shamanism, the traditional shamans can also use their power to harm other people – the Greenlandic shamans sometimes summon an evil entity called *tupilak* in order to attack their enemy, or steal their soul.<sup>19</sup> As such, shaman is often a feared and at the same time isolated figure.

The outlined differences suggest that Castaneda's work does not yet contain all the elements typical for Neo-Shamanism. There is certainly universalism and individualism – although a strong exclusivism was still apparent at an early stage (a tradition passed from master to disciple), Castaneda later talks about his decision to open the tradition represented by Don Juan to all mankind.<sup>20</sup> Castaneda's teaching has multiple phases – in the early work, attention is focused on witchcraft and altered states of consciousness, and later on a more systematic mythological interpretation of the world with a specific ritual-religious practice. The ultimate goal of the teaching is to “escape the Eagle”, an impersonal entity subsisting on energy derived from consciousness of people who die. To escape effectively means to preserve one's individual consciousness after the physical death. The goal of Castaneda's teaching is neither individual healing, nor collective harmony, contrary to the approach of Core Shamanism that is far closer to psychotherapy in this respect.<sup>21</sup>

This is also related to the overall mood of Castaneda's work – unlike most of the New Age movement, it does not seek friendliness and positivity. Quite on the contrary, Castaneda explicitly speaks of the need to focus on the “frightening side of the world”.<sup>22</sup> His philosophy is not hedonistic; it is based on the ethos of a warrior who must be very hard on himself in order to have the firm discipline necessary to fight for his consciousness. He does not speak of harmony with the universe, all humans and creatures. Instead, he repeatedly mentions that the universe is a predatory place, filled with beings that drain energy from human beings.<sup>23</sup> Relationships with other

<sup>19</sup> RASMUSSEN, *Grónské mýty a pověsti*, p. 304.

<sup>20</sup> CASTANEDA, *Čtenáři nekonečna*, p. 94.

<sup>21</sup> MICHAEL J. HARNER, *The Way of the Shaman*, San Francisco and New York: Harper One 1990, *passim*; SCURO and RODD, “Neo-Shamanism”, p. 1–6.

<sup>22</sup> GATO, *Učení Nagualů* [The Teachings of the Naguals], Praha: DharmaGaia 1999, *passim*.

<sup>23</sup> CASTANEDA, *Čtenáři nekonečna*, p. 105.

people are also depicted in very dark colours, because each relationship creates, according to Castaneda, an emotional attachment that deprives one of his life energy. Life is essentially a struggle for energy that is desperately scarce. Castaneda, on his quest for knowledge, encounters enemy wizards, beings called “allies”, and in these encounters, he often fights for his life and is in danger of losing his soul.<sup>24</sup>

Castaneda is situated in a liminal position – on the border of different genres and worlds. He takes pride in his intangibility and actively supports it – by refusing to speak in the public for a long time, systematically sweeping off all his tracks, obscuring his identity, spreading half-truths and stories. And he even reframes this trait as a sorcerer’s art of ‘stalking’. He is not a shaman in the true sense, nor an urban shaman; he is not an anthropologist, nor is he a writer of fiction or even a priest. Some interpretations point to the fact that his true inspiration is not traditional Shamanism at all, but European tradition of Philosophy and Social Science: the Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, the Ethnomethodology of Harold Garfinkel, the Social Constructionism of Luckman and Berger, and European Occultism and Mysticism, namely the poetry of Saint John of the Cross.<sup>25</sup> Yet, it is by this very quality of intangibility that he fulfils a certain universal idea of a shaman, standing at the border of the human world and the “more-than-human” world including nature with its animals and all kinds of spirits; a shaman, who often obscures his art, who can be tricky and inapprehensive.<sup>26</sup>

## Castaneda’s place in the field of psychotherapy

Having described Castaneda’s role in the Neo-Shamanistic field, we can proceed to ask if Castaneda has something to say in the field of Psychotherapy. First of all it is necessary to say that Psychotherapy in itself is a huge field, which is difficult to define, being seen as an application of the science of Psychology, following the paradigm of evidence-based practice by some, or rather as an autonomous field with its own terminology and modes of thinking.<sup>27</sup> While Castaneda’s concepts would definitely

<sup>24</sup> For one of the somewhat horror-like meetings with an “ally” see CARLOS CASTANEDA, *A Separate Reality: Further Conversations with Don Juan*, New York: Simon and Schuster 1971, p. 289–295.

<sup>25</sup> LARRY BARON, “Slipping inside the Crack between the Worlds: Carlos Castaneda, Alfred Schutz, and the Theory of Multiple Realities”, *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 23 (2, 1983): p. 52–69; BOURSEILLER, *Carlos Castaneda, pravda lži, životopis*, p. 34.

<sup>26</sup> RASMUSSEN, *Grónské mýty a pověsti*, p. 302.

<sup>27</sup> GLENYS PARRY, “Evidence-Based Psychotherapy: An Overview”, in NANCY ROWLAND and STEPHEN GOSS (eds.), *Evidence Based Counselling and Psychological Therapies*, London and Philadelphia: Routledge 2001, p. 57–76; EMMY VAN DEURZEN-SMITH and DAVID SMITH, “Is Psychotherapy an Autonomous Scientific Discipline? A Preliminary Investigation” [online], *Irish Association of Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapy* 27 (1996), available online at <https://iahp.org/inside-out/issue-27-winter-1996/is-psychotherapy-an-autonomous-scientific-discipline>. In this respect, we can add that psychotherapy operating within the postmodernist paradigm often praises individual relationship, personal stories and ideological accord of a client with the school of psychotherapy they attend more than scientific evidence, see also below.

not be compatible with all kinds of Psychotherapy, he can find his audience especially within the humanistic, existential or transpersonal schools.

Taking on a Jungian perspective, we can see Castaneda by the lens of the “wounded healer” archetype.<sup>28</sup> Having a non-standard psychological profile and dealing with altered states of consciousness, he could easily be seen as balancing on the edge of sanity and madness while writing his dissertation.<sup>29</sup> The border between him doing an anthropological research and being deluded became dangerously thin and there was even some rumour that he was in a psychiatric hospital, or even that he committed suicide.<sup>30</sup> However, similarly to shamans who survive their initial shamanic illness, Castaneda seems to have passed his profane initiation ritual of submitting his doctoral thesis successfully and he came out of it reborn and empowered. He definitely discovered some way of healing for himself. But can he do that for others as well?

Castaneda described in his books an initiation path in which the boundaries of the ego were often disturbed in a very violent way and which therefore only resembles little from the therapeutic context.<sup>31</sup> Although various psychotherapeutic approaches differ greatly, the emphasis on safe environment is seen as key to the success of Psychotherapy.<sup>32</sup> Of course, there are controversies and while some psychotherapeutic approaches are based on confronting the client with their traumas and fears and challenging their defence mechanisms,<sup>33</sup> humanistic and existential approaches tend to be less directive and more respectful of the client’s development and defence.<sup>34</sup>

Although the techniques and experiences that Castaneda describes are often threatening and disintegrating, and his personality is portrayed in quite dark colours by many people who lived in close contact with him,<sup>35</sup> his work has not gone unno-

<sup>28</sup> LAWRENCE J. KIRMAYER, “Asklepian Dreams: The Ethos of the Wounded-Healer in the Clinical Encounter”, *Transcultural Psychiatry* 40 (2003): p. 248–277.

<sup>29</sup> MATYÁŠ MÜLLER, “Carlos Castaneda jako zrcadlo psychiatrie” [Carlos Castaneda as a Mirror of Psychiatry], *Dingir: Religijnistický časopis o současné náboženské scéně* 14 (2, 2011): p. 38–40.

<sup>30</sup> BOURSEILLER, *Carlos Castaneda, pravda lži, životopis*, p. 97; Castaneda, *Čtenáři nekonečna*, p. 73.

<sup>31</sup> Describing these practices is beyond the scope of this article. Especially the early books describe how Don Juan strived to shatter Castaneda’s mind trained in scientific skepticism with the help of psychedelic plants, manipulating, often suddenly and without warning, his perception and consciousness so that he could see like a sorcerer.

<sup>32</sup> ALAN RAPPOPORT, “The Patient’s Search for Safety: The Organizing Principle in Psychotherapy”, *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training* 34 (3, 1996): p. 250–261. A safe relationship with the therapist is also one of the so called “common factors” in psychotherapy; for an integrative review see MICHAEL J. LAMBERT and DEAN E. BARLEY, “Research Summary on the Therapeutic Relationship and Psychotherapy Outcome”, *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training* 38 (4, 2001): p. 357–361.

<sup>33</sup> DAVID J. NUTT and MICHAEL SHARPE, “Uncritical Positive Regard?: Issues in the Efficacy and Safety of Psychotherapy”, *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 22(1, 2008): p. 3–6.

<sup>34</sup> We can often see this even within specific approaches. For example, while Wilhelm Reich and many of his followers who practiced his vegetotherapy would disrupt the defenses of their clients in a radical way, David Boadella, who was also Reich’s student and elaborated on his method, creating a new system called biosynthesis, was considerably more cautious in this respect and realized that careless and overly rapid disruption of the defenses may lead to the development of a psychotic state. See DAVID BOADELLA, *Lifestreams*, London: Routledge 1987, *passim*.

<sup>35</sup> See for example an account of his ex-lover and apprentice: AMY WALLACE, *Sorcerer’s Apprentice: My Life with Carlos Castaneda*, Berkeley: Frog Books 2007, *passim*.

ticed in the field of Psychotherapy. It inspired especially some authors within the Gestalt therapy community. Jorge Rosner, an influential American Gestalt therapist, worked with the concept of the assemblage point and its movement, which, in Castaneda's system, corresponds to the ability to perceive various aspects of the world.<sup>36</sup> Castaneda's legacy also served as an inspiration for his friend, psychiatrist and Gestalt psychotherapist Claudio Naranjo.<sup>37</sup> Joseph Zinker, another important figure of the Gestalt field, incorporated elements of Castaneda's phenomenological approach and the concept of *seeing* into his therapeutic approach.<sup>38</sup> His thoughts were further developed by Judit Domokos, who pointed to parallels between Perls'<sup>39</sup> emphasis on experiencing "here and now" and Castaneda's concept of a warrior who must always be fully aware of the present moment and not be distracted by doubts and feelings coming from the past.<sup>40</sup>

Various Castaneda's concepts have also been mentioned in other psychotherapeutic contexts. The American psychoanalyst Marie Coleman Nelson has attempted to integrate some concepts relating in particular to the sorcerers' ritual of initiation described by Castaneda into her psychoanalytic theory and practice.<sup>41</sup> Teresa Robles incorporated Castaneda's concept of the "path of the heart" into her therapeutic approach of Milton Erickson.<sup>42</sup> The Italian psychiatrist and Gestalt psychotherapist Gianni Francesetti compares panic attacks, which he regards as a syndrome typical for the postmodern times, with their value fragmentation and a high level of uncertainty, to Castaneda's concept of "stopping the world". It refers to a state in which all of the sorcerer's defences that have forced them to see the world in one learned way are crumbled and new horizons of possibilities emerge if one is prepared.<sup>43 44</sup>

<sup>36</sup> JAY TROPIANSKAIA, "Carlos Castaneda and Gestalt revisited" [online], *Gestalt institute of Toronto*, 2017, accessed March 2019, available at <https://gestalt.on.ca/carlos-castaneda-gestalt-revisited>.

<sup>37</sup> JEFFREY J. KRIPAL, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press 2007, p. 174.

<sup>38</sup> JOSEPH ZINKER, *Creative Process in Gestalt Therapy*, Brunner/Mazel 1977, cf p. 258–270.

<sup>39</sup> Frederick S. Perls was the founder, or one of the founders, of the Gestalt therapy. See FREDERICK S. PERLS, *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*, Toronto, New York and London: Bantam Books 1972, *passim*.

<sup>40</sup> To get rid of this habit of "ordinary people", warriors use a technique called "sweeping". See JUDITH DOMOKOS, "Similarities and Parallellism Between Gestalt and an Irregular Research of an Anthropologist" [online], *European Association for Gestalt Therapy Newsletter* 2017, accessed March 2019, available online: [https://www.eagt.org/joomla/images/Downloads/Newsletters/EAGTnews-30\\_page\\_15-16.pdf](https://www.eagt.org/joomla/images/Downloads/Newsletters/EAGTnews-30_page_15-16.pdf).

<sup>41</sup> MARIE C. NELSON, "Paths of Power: Psychoanalysis and Sorcery", *Psychoanalytic review* 63 (3, 1976): p. 333–360.

<sup>42</sup> TERESA ROBLES, "Creating Paths with Heart", in MICHAEL F. HOYT (ed.), *Therapist Stories of Inspiration, Passion, and Renewal: What's Love Got to Do with It?*, New York and Hove: Taylor & Francis 2013, p. 232–239.

<sup>43</sup> GIANNI FRANCESETTI (ed.), *Panic Attacks and Postmodernity: Gestalt Therapy Between Clinical and Social Perspectives*, Milano: FrancoAngeli 2007, p. 81.

<sup>44</sup> Castaneda or Don Juan is mentioned in connection with psychotherapy at several other places, see for example CELIA E. FALICOV, *Latino Families in Therapy: A Guide to Multicultural Practice*, New York: Guilford Press 1998, p. 82; CARL A. WHITAKER and DAVID V. KEITH, "Symbolic-Experiential Family Therapy", in ALAN S. GURMAN and DAVID P. KNISKERN (eds.), *Handbook of Family Therapy*, London and New York: Routledge 2014, p. 209.

Although these authors draw inspiration from various aspects of his work, two elements can be seen as especially significant for the field of Psychotherapy. These reflect two trends that have played an important role in the field of contemporary Humanities: the narrative turn and the body turn.

## Castaneda and the narrative

Other articles in this issue further analyse Castaneda's connection to the Social Sciences and Phenomenological Philosophy and Social Constructionism, and I would like to refer the reader to them for a more in-depth examination. Suffice it to say here that Castaneda's approach can be understood as narrativist – he understands the world we see around us as a projection of an image that is passed down from generation to generation and which, in his metaphysical-energetic language, is fixed by a certain position of the “assemblage point”.<sup>45</sup> The world itself is an “incomprehensible, (...) sheer mystery”,<sup>46</sup> and we endlessly weave stories around it – a story of science, a story of magic, etc. These stories are “descriptions of the world” that coexist side by side without refuting one another.<sup>47</sup> The sorcerer's apprentice rewrites their life story, systematically striving to get rid of their personal identity in order to create a new one.

Narrative approaches seek to do the same, though perhaps in a less dramatic and mythological way, in the context of Psychotherapy. In narrative Psychotherapy, the point is to realize that an interpretation through which a client understands themselves is only one of the possible interpretations that has been objectified by repeated narration by their social environment and themselves. The narrative approach is inherently political and includes, in addition to changing individual narratives, the Foucauldian ‘rebellion of the subjugated knowledge’,<sup>48</sup> which involves trying to disseminate new stories in a wider social context and to change the established social narratives and stereotypes.<sup>49</sup>

According to Bradley Lewis, who examines the impact of the narrative turn on Psychiatry, the concept of narrative has a triple role in the context of Psychotherapy and Psychiatry. First, it is the very act of transforming a personal narrative at the client's individual level; secondly, it is a narrative that is associated with the therapy

<sup>45</sup> CASTANEDA, *Čtenáři nekonečna*, p. 13–17.

<sup>46</sup> CASTANEDA, *A Separate Reality*, p. 264.

<sup>47</sup> CASTANEDA, *Čtenáři nekonečna*, *passim*. We can see a parallel with T. S. Kuhn for whom scientific paradigms were mutually “incommensurable”, see THOMAS S. KUHN, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1970, p. 103.

<sup>48</sup> MICHEL FOUCAULT, “Two lectures“, in COLIN GORDON (ed.), *Michel Foucault Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977 by Michel Foucault*, New York: Pantheon Books 1980, p. 78–108.

<sup>49</sup> JILL FREEDMAN and GENE COMBS, *Narrative Therapy: The Social Construction of Preferred Realities*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company 1996, *passim*.

school<sup>50</sup>; thirdly, it is the “narrative of the narrative”, or the ultimate idea that it is the narrative that has a therapeutic effect.<sup>51</sup> Seen in this manner, the narrative is the effective agent in any form of therapy, and the contribution of the narrative therapy as such consists only in being aware of this mechanism and explicitly working with it. The narrative approach presupposes a plurality of approaches – each client has different needs and is compatible with different kinds of narrative. Paradoxically, applied to the field of Psychiatry, the narrative approach, or “post-Psychiatry”, then recognizes that many people are in fact comfortable with the modernist narrative associated with a psychiatrist who presents the biomedical model as the only truth and authoritatively prescribes psychopharmaceuticals. However, it is essential for the post-psychiatric theoretical framework that there should be alternative currents that offer a different narrative.<sup>52</sup>

Castaneda’s therapeutic contribution can be understood within this theoretical framework and includes all the three moments described by Lewis. First, Castaneda’s books describe the transformation of his personal story – from a man balancing on the edge of sanity, experiencing his “shamanic” illness, to a powerful man. They show how an ordinary man became a warrior and a sorcerer, culminating in his leap into the abyss.<sup>53</sup> Second, fulfilling Lewis’ second meaning of narrative at the social level, Castaneda helps to change the narrative in the society. His ideas certainly reflected the intellectual environment of his time, and the successful dissemination of his work was made possible by the emerging postmodern cultural and intellectual framework and the development of the Counterculture and the Psychedelic movements. On the other hand, he was also an influential person in this cultural change<sup>54</sup> and had a considerable influence on a typical phenomenon of postmodern spirituality, Neo-Shamanism. Finally, corresponding with Lewis’ third meaning, Castaneda’s system also contains the belief that reality itself is created by narratives, that these are “effective fictions”, that the world is as it is to us because we believe in it – and that it can be changed by switching the perspective from which we observe it – or, using Castaneda’s mythopoetic language, by “moving the assemblage point”.

Castaneda criticized the dominant philosophical approach on which the social values of his time – Cartesian dualism, objectivist conception of truth, and idealistic morality – were based. Instead of the *truth* in the objectivist meaning of language corresponding to reality, he focuses on *power* – the path of a warrior can be seen essentially

<sup>50</sup> Basically, it is a collective socio-cultural narrative to which the client links his personal narrative; for example the narrative of an awkward, unskillful, and incompetent individual can be replaced by the narrative of human potential, seeing the person as sensitive, original, and creative. Every therapeutic approach emphasizes different aspects of “being healthy”.

<sup>51</sup> BRADLEY LEWIS, “Narrative and Psychiatry”, *Current Opinion in Psychiatry* 24 (6, 2011): p. 489–494.

<sup>52</sup> BRADLEY LEWIS, “Psychiatry and Postmodern Theory”, *Journal of Medical Humanities* 21 (2, 2000): p. 71–84.

<sup>53</sup> CARLOS CASTANEDA, *Fire from Within*, New York: Simon and Schuster 1991, *passim*.

<sup>54</sup> Inspiring, among others, Paul Feyerabend and Zdeněk Neubauer.

as a search for power.<sup>55</sup> Power, in Castanedan terms, is not an abstract quality, but a living, bodily experienced reality. The process of shifting the understanding of this is illustrated in the first three of Castaneda's books, by a dialog between the young Carlos, still clinging to the rationalistic worldview, with his mysterious teacher Don Juan, artfully escaping his scholastic questioning about whether his extraordinary experiences were true and real, or rather a matter of fantasy. This can be exemplified by the situation in which Castaneda saw a strange and fantastic animal in the desert. After the initial shock, he triumphantly revealed it as an illusion, in fact a branch swinging in the wind. Don Juan laughed at his "revelation" and told him that Carlos had actually missed a big opportunity to encounter a spirit and gain a great deal of power.<sup>56</sup>

### Castaneda and the body

As for the second point, the body turn, Castaneda generally places lived, physically experienced knowledge above the theoretical or abstract knowledge typical for modern Euro-American science and rationalist Philosophy. His approach is ultimately pragmatic in the meaning that a warrior should always base their action on the fundamental fact of their mortality. In an interview from 1972, Castaneda compares don Juan's approach with existentialism. He argues that though one can see a parallel here, for a warrior, death is not an abstract category, but a physically present reality that they take as a guide in every decision.<sup>57</sup> This decision-making is supposed to lead to "impeccable" action that should, in Castaneda's system, replace traditional morality based on abstract ideals – similarly to truth being replaced by power (see above). Castaneda often mentions that the knowledge he speaks of does not concern the head but the whole body. It is not surprising then that Castaneda gets mentioned in connection with body-Psychotherapy<sup>58</sup> and it would be justified to suppose that Castaneda's significance for Psychotherapy may be one of the greatest in this rapidly developing field. In this context, it should be noted that Castaneda's later work also included systematic body work – an exercise called 'Tensegrity'.<sup>59</sup>

It may seem that the emphasis on the body can be countered by the importance of dreaming in Castaneda's system. Without going too deep into this topic, let us mention that for Castaneda, everything one encounters is a reality and it is virtually

<sup>55</sup> We can see some parallels with Nietzsche's conception of "will to power", see PAVEL KOUBA, *Nietzsche: Filosofická interpretace* [Nietzsche: A Philosophical Interpretation], Praha: OIKOYMENH 2006, p. 235–280.

<sup>56</sup> CARLOS CASTANEDA, *Journey to Ixtlan*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1972, p. 103.

<sup>57</sup> CASTANEDA, *Čtenáři nekonečna*, p. 75–77.

<sup>58</sup> ASAF ROLEF BEN-SHAHAR, "The Relational Turn and Body Psychotherapy IV: Gliding on the Strings that Connect Us Resonance in Relational Body Psychotherapy", *International Body Psychotherapy Journal: The Art and Science of Somatic Praxis* 11 (1, 2012): 12–24; NICK TOTTON (ed.), *New Dimensions in Body Psychotherapy*, Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press 2005, p. 153.

<sup>59</sup> CARLOS CASTANEDA, *Magical Passes*, San Francisco: Laugan Productions 1998, *passim*. CASTANEDA, *Čtenáři nekonečna*, p. 113.

impossible to distinguish between (physical) reality and imagination. Thus, even in dreaming one encounters absolutely real phenomena and experiences the world with one's body. We can see it either as materialization of the realm of dreams or as idealization of physical reality.<sup>60</sup>

The sum of the two approaches that pervade Castaneda's work is a broadening of the epistemological and ontological horizons as opposed to the positivist approach he was challenging. Castaneda breaks the line between reality on the one hand and fiction and imagination on the other. What could be easily dismissed as hallucination or illusion (as in the case of the animated branch) from the perspective of psychiatry, is getting a new meaning within his system and becomes an opportunity for gaining power. However, although Castaneda ultimately came to "democratize" his teaching, he has always argued that the path of knowledge is dangerous, demanding, and that only a handful will succeed with the ultimate goal of the warrior – "to escape the Eagle".<sup>61</sup> In this respect, he differs both from Neo-Shamanism and Psychotherapy.

## Conclusion

During the last decades, a certain conceptual and practical convergence of Neo-Shamanism and Psychotherapy has occurred, thus potentially giving birth to a new hybrid cultural form.<sup>62</sup> Within the postmodern conceptual and experiential framework, Shamanism is more often seen as a root of Psychotherapy and shamans as ancient therapists,<sup>63</sup> as opposed to earlier modernist ethnopsychiatric and anthropological notions that often conceived a shaman in terms of psychopathology.<sup>64</sup> Shamanism

<sup>60</sup> If we put the dream work in the context of traditional psychotherapy, we can say, in a very simplified manner, that while for Sigmund Freud dreams were a path to the unconscious and interpreted according to sexual keys, for Carl Gustav Jung they were a path to the collective unconscious and interpreted according to an archetype key, and for Medard Boss they were distinctive phenomena and were not interpreted at all, for Castaneda, dreams were simply reality and were used to gain power.

<sup>61</sup> CASTANEDA, *Čtenáři nekonečna*, p. 23–35.

<sup>62</sup> ANDREAS ACKERMANN, "Cultural Hybridity: Between Metaphor and Empiricism", in PHILLIP STOCKHAMMER (ed.), *Conceptualizing Cultural Hybridization*, Heidelberg: Springer 2012, p. 5–25.

<sup>63</sup> Within academic circles, the change of the perspective was marked by the seminal article by Claude Lévi-Strauss in which the famous anthropologist likened shamanism to psychotherapy. Writing his influential compendium at a similar time, Mircea Eliade prepared the ground for authors such as Michael Harner and, of course, Carlos Castaneda who finally popularized the topic. See CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS, "The Effectiveness of Symbols", in WILLIAM A. LESSA (ed.), *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*, New York: Harper & Row 1970, p. 318–327. ELIADE, *Shamanism, passim*. The Jungian and transpersonal tradition also make the connection of psychotherapy and shamanism very explicit. On the other hand, it is also necessary to keep in mind that this convergence of genres applies only to some psychotherapeutic schools while those established in the mainstream would often dismiss it.

<sup>64</sup> Within this framework, the figure of the shaman has been identified with the figure of a 'madman' located in exotic environments. Shamanism has been associated with schizophrenia, arctic hysteria, neurosis or ethnic psychosis. See GEORGES DEVEREUX, "Shamans as Neurotics", *American Anthropologist* 63 (5, 1961), p. 1088–1090; ELIADE, *Shamanism*, p. 23–32; RONALD LITTLEWOOD,

imported into modern urban environments, practiced in the one-on-one setting, is often influenced by psychotherapeutic practice and approach.<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, some psychotherapeutic schools are inspired by (Neo)Shamanism or some of its elements.<sup>66 67</sup>

Castaneda is a liminal figure who is somehow linked to both Neo-Shamanism and Psychotherapy, as we have seen. But at the same time, he points to their differences. Even though his approach is believed to be derived from Western occult and philosophical tradition, much more than from indigenous Shamanism, he seems to be well aware that Shamanism carries a lot of danger and pain with it. Thus, he reminds us that its goals are ultimately different from those of Psychotherapy. If we saw only an individualized, universalist, and positively tuned Neo-Shamanism, the boundaries between it and Psychotherapy could be largely blurred. By this, both areas could lose their specific values, Shamanism being somehow desacralized, and Psychotherapy deprived of its sobriety and rationality.

Castaneda remains a trickster and a teaser – he can be the one who opens a new door, offers a new worldview and new connections. At the same time, however, his approach warns against stagnation in one stream. In fact, what Castaneda does is not simply to take on the sorcerer's view of the world and to reject the modern one. Castaneda has never opposed rationality and science as such in a radical way. To the contrary, he kept encouraging his disciples to study science. In this sense, he is a consistent postmodernist – criticizing scientism, but not science itself. He sees science and intellectual knowledge as useful, but not exhaustive, in terms of knowledge of the world. Mastering multiple descriptions of the world is an advantage and can help to “slip through the descriptions of the world” and see the world in its energetic essence.<sup>68</sup>

Castaneda's thinking offers the opportunity to look at the limits of our worldview that is created by the culture in which we live. In his times, this meant the modern rationalistic paradigm, but today, paradoxically, it can mean the postmodern eclectic culture that mixes different genres together. What was a revolutionary stance, or a “movement of the assemblage point” in his terms, at one moment is subsequently turning into an established and petrified cultural form. Neo-Shamanism, like any other cultural phenomenon, is subject to the Turnerian transition from antistructure

---

“Psychiatry's Culture”, in JOHN COX and VIEDA SKULTANS (eds.), *Anthropological Approaches to Psychological Medicine: Crossing Bridges*, London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers 2000, p. 66–94; JULIAN SILVERMAN, “Shamans and Acute Schizophrenia”, *American anthropologist* 69 (1, 1967), 21–31.

<sup>65</sup> GALINA LINDQUIST, “Bringing the soul back to the self: Soul retrieval in neo-shamanism”, *Social Analysis* 48 (2, 2014): p. 155–173; SCURO and RODD, “Neo-shamanism”, p. 1–6.

<sup>66</sup> MARLENE DOBKIN DE RÍOS, “What We Can Learn from Shamanic Healing: Brief Psychotherapy with Latino Immigrant Clients”, *American Journal of Public Health* 92 (10, 2002): p. 1576–1581; EUGENE TAYLOR and JANET PIEDILATO, “Shamanism and the American Psychotherapeutic Counter-Culture”, *Journal of Ritual Studies* 16 (2, 2002): p. 129–140.

<sup>67</sup> It is also necessary to keep in mind that this convergence of genres applies only to some psychotherapeutic schools while those established in the mainstream would often dismiss it.

<sup>68</sup> CASTANEDA, *Čtenáři nekonečna*, p. 20–35.

to structure.<sup>69</sup> In the case of Shamanism, this can mean commercialization, creating a new hierarchy, and losing depth of content. In the case of linking Shamanism with more established forms of Psychotherapy, this can lead to a logical effort to find evidence-based “effective elements” of Shamanism, as is the case with psychotherapy<sup>70</sup> – such a process can then lead to a further universalization and standardization of the original traditions.

If we look at Castaneda’s work, we have to conclude that its potential for psychotherapeutic use is probably lower than that of Neo-Shamanism, such as that of Harner. However, as we have seen, some of its elements can be successfully integrated in psychotherapeutic theory and practice. What can be conceived as truly therapeutic around Castaneda is the fact that his system does not stop with deconstruction but also involves new and conscious creation. Castaneda helped to give birth to the West’s new form of Shamanism that is based on the rehabilitation of imagination and direct bodily experience as opposed to abstract cognitive knowledge – and that is definitely something that can be very helpful in a contemporary psychotherapeutic setting for the people of the digital age, disembodied and with shattered identity.

Shamanism seems to have undergone its own shamanic illness in the West – seen as a manifestation of a pathology in the first place, only to subsequently be rediscovered with all its therapeutic potential. At the same time, Castaneda may have been the one to help the West see that this Shamanism is actually a fiction. But if we accept Castaneda’s perspective, in which fiction and reality blend together, we can see that it is no less real than the “original” Shamanism. He can help us realize that the Shamanism we dreamed up here in the West is a projection of our own cultural patterns onto exotic landscapes. He can help us recognize that the idea of the universal archaic truth that we have come to believe in is but one of the many stories specific to our culture and time. But also, that it is a story that is needed and healing in the context of our days. He can help us indulge in this fiction and not blame ourselves for it; to practice it as a kind of a “controlled folly” – knowing its limitations, experiencing it fully and studying it critically at the same time.

## REFERENCES

- “A Journal of Applied Hermeneutics” [online], *Internet Archive* 1996, accessed 2020, available online at [https://archive.org/stream/carloscastaneda/Carlos%20Castaneda%20books/Carlos%20Castaneda%20-%20A%20Journal%20Of%20Applied\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/carloscastaneda/Carlos%20Castaneda%20books/Carlos%20Castaneda%20-%20A%20Journal%20Of%20Applied_djvu.txt).
- ACKERMANN, ANDREAS, “Cultural Hybridity: Between Metaphor and Empiricism”, in Phillip Stockhammer (ed.), *Conceptualizing Cultural Hybridization*, Heidelberg: Springer 2012, p. 5–25.

<sup>69</sup> VICTOR TURNER, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 2017, *passim*.

<sup>70</sup> See PARRY, “Evidence-Based Psychotherapy: An Overview,” p. 57–76, TIMOTHY C. THOMASON, “The Trend Toward Evidence-Based Practice and the Future of Psychotherapy”, *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 64 (1, 2010): p. 29–38.

- ATKINSON, JANE MONNING, "Shamanisms Today", *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21 (1, 1992): p. 307–330.
- BEN-SHAHAR, ASAF ROLEF, "The Relational Turn and Body Psychotherapy IV.: Gliding on the Strings that Connect Us Resonance in Relational Body Psychotherapy", *International Body Psychotherapy Journal: The Art and Science of Somatic Praxis* 11 (1, 2012): 12–24.
- BARON, LARRY, "Slipping Inside the Crack Between the Worlds: Carlos Castaneda, Alfred Schutz, and the Theory of Multiple Realities", *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 23 (2, 1983): p. 52–69.
- BOADELLA, DAVID, *Lifestreams*, London: Routledge 1987, 239 p.
- BOURSEILLER, CHRISTOPHE, *Carlos Castaneda, pravda lži, životopis* [La vérité du mensonge], Praha: Volvox Globator 2006, 207 p.
- CASTANEDA, CARLOS, *A Separate Reality: Further Conversations with Don Juan*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971, 318 p.
- CASTANEDA, CARLOS, *Journey to Ixtlan*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1972, 268 p.
- CASTANEDA, CARLOS, *Čtenáři nekonečna* [The Warrior's Way: The Readers of the Infinity], Praha: Dobra 2004, 162 p.
- CASTANEDA, CARLOS, *The Teachings of Don Juan*, University of California Press 1968, 196 p.
- CASTANEDA, CARLOS, *Fire from Within*, Simon and Schuster 1991, 230 p.
- CASTANEDA, CARLOS, *Magical Passes*, San Francisco: Laugan Productions 1998, 240 p.
- CHRYSIDES, GEORGE D., "Defining the New Age", in DAREN KEMP and JAMES R. LEWIS (eds.), *Handbook of New Age*, Boston: Brill 2007, p. 5–24.
- DOBKIN DE RIOS, MARLENE, "What We Can Learn from Shamanic Healing: Brief Psychotherapy with Latino Immigrant Clients", *American Journal of Public Health* 92 (10, 2002): p. 1576–1581.
- DE MILLE, RICHARD, *Castaneda's Journey*, Santa Barbara: Capra Press 1976, 258 p.
- DEVEREUX, GEORGES, "Shamans as Neurotics", *American Anthropologist* 63 (5, 1961): p. 1088–1090.
- DOMOKOS, JUDITH, "Similarities and Parallellism Between Gestalt and an Irregular Research of an Anthropologist" [online], *European Association for Gestalt Therapy Newsletter* 2017, accessed March 2019, available online: [https://www.eagt.org/joomla/images/Downloads/Newsletters/EAGTnews-30\\_page\\_15-16.pdf](https://www.eagt.org/joomla/images/Downloads/Newsletters/EAGTnews-30_page_15-16.pdf).
- ELIADE, MIRCEA, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, London: Penguin 1964, 610 p.
- FALICOV, CELIA E., *Latino Families in Therapy: A Guide to Multicultural Practice*, New York: Guilford Press 1998, 484 p.
- FOUCAULT, MICHEL, "Two Lectures", in COLIN GORDON (ed.), *Michel Foucault Power /Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977 by Michel Foucault*, New York: Pantheon Books 1980, 288 p.
- FRANCESSETTI, GIANNI (ed.), *Panic Attacks and Postmodernity: Gestalt Therapy Between Clinical and Social Perspectives*, Milano: FrancoAngeli 2007, 225 p.
- FREEDMAN, JILL, and GENE COMBS, *Narrative Therapy: The Social Construction of Preferred Realities*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company 1996, 305 p.
- GATO, *Učení Nagualů* [The Teachings of the Naguals], Praha: DharmaGaia 1999, 168 p.
- GURMAN, ALAN S., and DAVID P. KNISKERN (eds.), *Handbook of Family Therapy*, London and New York: Routledge 2014, 816 p.
- HARDMAN, CHARLOTTE E., "'He May Be Lying But What He Says Is True': The Sacred Tradition of Don Juan as Reported by Carlos Castaneda, Anthropologist, Trickster, Guru, Allegorist", in JAMES R. LEWIS and OLAV HAMMER (eds.), *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*, New York: Cambridge University Press 2007, p. 38–55.

- HEELAS, PAUL, *The New Age Movement: Religion, Culture and Society in the Age of Postmodernity*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 1996, 266 p.
- HARNER, MICHAEL, *Castaneda Controversy – Michael Harner’s Reply* [online], 1978, accessed January 2020, available online at <https://web.archive.org/web/20170916140115/https://documents.mx/documents/castaneda-controversy-michael-harners-reply.html>.
- HARNER, MICHAEL, *The Way of the Shaman*, San Francisco and New York: Harper One 1990, 208 p.
- HOBSON, GEARY, “The Rise of the White Shaman as a New Version of Cultural Imperialism”, in GEARY HOBSON (ed.), *The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature*, Albuquerque: Red Earth Press 1978, p. 100–108.
- KELLEY, JANE H., *Yaqui Women: Contemporary Life Histories*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1978, 265 p.
- KIRMAYER, LAWRENCE J., “Asklepian Dreams: The Ethos of the Wounded-Healer in the Clinical Encounter”, *Transcultural Psychiatry* 40 (2003): p. 248–277.
- KOUBA, PAVEL, *Nietzsche: Filosofická interpretace* [Nietzsche: A Philosophical Interpretation], Praha: OIKOYMENH 2006, 288 p.
- KRIPAL, JEFFREY J., *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 2007, 574 p.
- KUHN, THOMAS S., *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1970, 210 p.
- LA BARRE, WESTON, “Stinging Criticism from the Author of The Peyote Cult”, in: DANIEL C. NOEL (ed.), *Seeing Castaneda: Reactions to the “Don Juan” writings of Carlos Castaneda*, New York: Putnam 1976, p. 40–42.
- LAMBERT, MICHAEL J., and DEAN E. BARLEY, “Research Summary on the Therapeutic Relationship and Psychotherapy Outcome”, *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training* 38 (4, 2001): p. 357–361.
- LEARY, TIMOTHY, *Flashbacks: A Personal and Cultural History of an Era: An Autobiography*, New York: Tarcher 1990, p. 164, 337, 392.
- LÉVI-STRAUSS, CLAUDE, “The Effectiveness of Symbols”, in WILLIAM A. LESSA (ed.), *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*, New York: Harper & Row 1970, p. 318–327.
- LEWIS, BRADLEY, “Psychiatry and Postmodern Theory”, *Journal of Medical Humanities* 21 (2, 2000): p. 71–84.
- LEWIS, BRADLEY, “Narrative and Psychiatry”, *Current Opinion in Psychiatry* 24 (6, 2011): p. 489–494.
- LINDQUIST, GALINA, “Bringing the Soul back to the Self: Soul Retrieval in Neo-Shamanism”, *Social Analysis* 48 (2, 2014): p. 155–173.
- LITTLEWOOD, RONALD, “Psychiatry’s Culture”, in JOHN COX and VIEDA SKULTANS (eds.), *Anthropological Approaches to Psychological Medicine: Crossing Bridges*, London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers 2000, p. 66–94.
- MÜLLER, MATYÁŠ, “Carlos Castaneda jako zrcadlo psychiatrie” [Carlos Castaneda as a Mirror of Psychiatry], *Dingir: Religionistický časopis o současné náboženské scéně* 14 (2, 2011): p. 38–40.
- MURRAY, STEPHEN O., “The Scientific Reception of Castaneda”, *Contemporary Sociology* 8 (2, 1979): p. 189–92.
- NELSON, MARIE C., “Paths of Power: Psychoanalysis and Sorcery”, *Psychoanalytic Review* 63 (3, 1976): p. 333–360.

- NOEL, DANIEL C., *The Soul of Shamanism: Western Fantasies, Imaginal Realities*, New York: Continuum 1997, 252 p.
- NOEL, DANIEL C., *Seeing Castaneda: Reactions to the "Don Juan" Writings of Carlos Castaneda*, New York: Putnam, 1976, 250 p.
- NUTT, DAVID J., and MICHAEL SHARPE, "Uncritical Positive Regard? Issues in the Efficacy and Safety of Psychotherapy", *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 22 (1, 2008): p. 3–6.
- PARRY, GLENYS, "Evidence-Based Psychotherapy: An Overview", in NANCY ROWLAND and STEPHEN GOSS (eds.), *Evidence Based Counselling and Psychological Therapies*, London and Philadelphia: Routledge 2001, p. 57–76.
- PERLS, FREDERICK S., *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*, Toronto, New York and London: Bantam Books 1972, 306 p.
- RAPPOPORT, ALAN, "The Patient's Search for Safety: The Organizing Principle in Psychotherapy", *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training* 34 (3, 1996): p. 250–261.
- RASMUSSEN, KNUD, *Grónské mýty a pověsti* [The Myths and Legends of Greenland], Praha: Argo 1998, 321 p.
- ROBLES, TERESA, "Creating Paths with Heart", in MICHAEL F. HOYT (ed.), *Therapist Stories of Inspiration, Passion, and Renewal: What's Love Got to Do with It?*, New York and Hove: Taylor & Francis 2013, p. 232–239.
- SCURO, JUAN, and ROBIN RODD, "Neo-Shamanism", in HENRI GOOREN (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Latin American Religions*, [New York]: Springer 2014, p. 1–6.
- SILVERMAN, JULIAN, "Shamans and Acute Schizophrenia", *American Anthropologist* 69 (1, 1967): p. 21–31.
- SUTCLIFFE, STEVEN, *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices*, London and New York: Routledge 2002, 267 p.
- TAYLOR, EUGENE, and JANET PIEDILATO, "Shamanism and the American Psychotherapeutic Counter-Culture", *Journal of Ritual Studies* 16 (2, 2002): p. 129–140.
- THOMASON, TIMOTHY C., "The Trend Toward Evidence-Based Practice and the Future of Psychotherapy", *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 64 (1, 2010): p. 29–38.
- TOTTON, NICK (ed.), *New Dimensions in Body Psychotherapy*, Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press 2005, 216 p.
- TROPIANSKAIA, JAY, "Carlos Castaneda and Gestalt Revisited" [online], *Gestalt Institute of Toronto* 2017, accessed March 2019, available at <https://gestalt.on.ca/carlos-castaneda-gestalt-revisited/>.
- TURNER, VICTOR, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, London: Routledge 1996, 232 p.
- VAN DEURZEN-SMITH, EMMY, and DAVID SMITH, "Is Psychotherapy an Autonomous Scientific Discipline? A Preliminary Investigation" [online], *Irish Association of Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapy* 27 (1996), available online at <https://iahip.org/inside-out/issue-27-winter-1996/is-psychotherapy-an-autonomous-scientific-discipline>.
- WALLACE, AMY, *Sorcerer's Apprentice: My Life with Carlos Castaneda*, Berkeley: Frog Books 2007, 430 p.
- YORK, MICHAEL, "The Role of Fear in Traditional and Contemporary Shamanism" [online], 2002, accessed September 2019, available online at <http://www.michaelyork.co.uk/Domus/CV/confpapers/cp-28.html>.
- ZINKER, JOSEPH, *Creative Process in Gestalt Therapy*, Brunner/Mazel 1977, 278 p.



---

# The Akashic Records: Origins and Relation to Western Concepts

Alex Nash

<https://doi.org/10.14712/25704893.2020.3>

---

**Abstract:** The term Akashic Records originates from the Indian word Akasha, which gained a new meaning after its adoption by the Theosophical Society. The first part of the text explains the origin of the concept of both Akasha and the Akashic Records. The article argues that the transformation was influenced by elements from philosophy and physics, as well as by the Christian doctrine of predestination. The final part of the article then describes an example of how concepts similar to the Akashic Records still appeared in the 20th century.

**Keywords:** Akashic records; Theosophy; Quantum physics; Predestination; Philosophy

**Abstrakt:** Termín „akášické“ záznamy pochází z indického pojmu Akasha, který po přijetí Theosofickou společností získal nový význam. Úvodní část textu vysvětluje původ obou těchto termínů. Článek argumentuje, že tato proměna byla ovlivněna prvky filozofie, fyziky i křesťanskou naukou predestinace. Druhá část článku pak poskytuje příklady využití konceptů podobných akášickým záznamům i ve dvacátém století.

**Klíčová slova:** Akášické záznamy; theosofie; kvantová fyzika; predestinace; filosofie

*Received:* 11 November 2019, *Accepted:* 7 January 2020

*Published online:* 2 October 2020

---

**Alex Nash**, Hussite Theological Faculty, Charles University

E-mail: [regentus@seznam.cz](mailto:regentus@seznam.cz)

© 2020 The Author. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>).

*Akashic Records* is a concept describing a space that contains information about everything in existence since the dawn of time.<sup>1</sup> If one were able to peer through the layer of reality separating us from it and access this infinite database, they would essentially be able to attain absolute knowledge on a scale that surpasses anything a normal human mind can comprehend by far.

In our digital age, with wi-fi networks always surrounding us, one might even be tempted to call these records the Internet of the universe. Yet at the same time, these archives are not meant to be seen as merely an abstract metaphysical concept, but instead they are to be an integral part of existence itself. They are a subtle part of life; one that has been and always will be present, regardless of our awareness of it.

However, the concept of the Akashic Records as we understand them today is only a result of a long process of transformation that arguably started with the rise of the Theosophical Society and its adoption of many native Indian terms. This includes the term *Akasha*, from which the Akashic Records would be derived.

The aim of this article is to explore the origins of *Akasha* and then explore possible influences on the progression from *Akasha* to the Akashic Records by looking for similar themes or concepts (such as parallel dimensions, the ability to reach omniscience, or predestination) in both science and religion. The article argues that there was a significant external influence, present in the transformation from *Akasha* to the Akashic Records, which can be at least partially understood through comparing each selected field of interest with the concept of the Akashic Records.

## The origins of the term Akasha

The origin of the term *Akasha* (Sanskrit *Ākāśa*) is in itself surprisingly difficult to pinpoint, mainly because of the enormous amount of esoteric and occult lore that has been attached to it since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Because of that, it is difficult to tell where the original concept ends, and its Western incarnation begins.

In all probability, *Akasha* comes from a transliteration of the Sanskrit word *Ākāśa* by early Western Indologists. At its core, *Ākāśa* can be translated as space, atmosphere or sky. Depending on the context it can also take a number of other meanings.<sup>2</sup>

In the complex metaphysical system of Samkhya for example, *Ākāśa* is one of the five gross elements (*mahābhūtas*), possessing a creative quality the other four lack. At times it is even considered responsible for the creation of the others. It is worth noting that it was from this particular version that Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) drew inspiration when he presented the term to Western audiences for the first time in his *Raja Yoga* (1896), although his own version presents *Ākāśa* as one of only two

<sup>1</sup> “Akashic record” [online], <https://www.britannica.com>, 2015, accessed January 2020, available online at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Akashic-record#ref260257>.

<sup>2</sup> ANNA POKAZANYEVA, “Mind Within Matter: Science, The Occult, and the (Meta)Physics of Ether and Akasha”, *Zygon* 51 ( 2, 2016): p. 325–326.

materials that make up the known universe – the other being Prāṇa<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, in the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika School, the term is generally understood as being a substratum of sound.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, Jainism and Buddhism also have their own meanings for the term. Within Jainism, it is seen as one of the six major substances (*dravyas*), while also providing a foundation on which the other five substances (namely *jīva*, *pudgala*, *dharma*, *adharmā* and *kāla*) exist. There are also two recognized types of Ākāśa: *Lokakasha* and *Alokakasha*, with the former designating a space containing all matter and motion, whereas the latter consists of an infinite void.<sup>5</sup>

In a somewhat similar fashion, Buddhism recognizes two types of Ākāśa. The first describes a limited space (named *ākāsa-dhātu*), which was defined by Nyanatiloka Mahathera (1878–1957) in the following way:

The space element has the characteristic of delimiting matter. Its function is to indicate the boundaries of matter. It is manifested as the confines of matter; or its manifestation consists in being untouched (by the 4 great elements), and in holes and apertures. Its proximate cause is the matter delimited. It is on account of the space element that one can say of material things delimited that “this is above. Below, around that.”<sup>6</sup>

The second, representing an endless empty space that has no place in objective reality (being purely conceptual), is named *ajatākāsā* and it is not included in the triad of the wholesome (*kusalatika*), which comprise reality. Later Buddhist schools changed the concept to serve as one of the unconditioned or uncreated states (*asankhata dharma*) instead, although not all schools adopted or supported this version.

It should be mentioned, however, that the previous definitions should not be taken as absolute, since the author’s conversion to Buddhism was greatly influenced by the Theosophical lecturer Edwin Böhme.<sup>7</sup>

The problem with any unified definition of Ākāśa is that the usage and understanding of the term is highly inconsistent and later Indian philosophers and scholars had different views on it. Some of these thinkers, like the 16th century scholar Vijnānabhikṣu, even proposed the existence of several different types of Ākāśa. Due to this lack of a clear definition, Ākāśa remained only an obscure concept, as far as Indian philosophy was concerned.<sup>8</sup>

To find a Western equivalent to Ākāśa, the closest match would be *aether* (αἰθήρ), the so called fifth element of the world, originally proposed by Aristotle and then

<sup>3</sup> SWAMI VIVEKANANDA, *Raja Yoga*, Leeds: Celepha’s Press 2003, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> A. PABLO IANNONE, *Dictionary of World Philosophy*, New York: Taylor & Francis 2001, p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> PRAVIN K. Shah, “Six Universal Substances or Entities” [online], *Jain Study Center of North Carolina*, 2002, accessed May 2019, available at <https://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~pluralsm/affiliates/jainism/jainedu/6dravya.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> NYANTILOKA, *Buddhist Dictionary*, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society 1998, p. 24–25.

<sup>7</sup> BHIKKU NYANATUSITA and HELLMUTH HECKER, *The Life of Nyanatiloka Thera: The Biography of a Western Buddhist Pioneer*, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society 2008, p. 19–20.

<sup>8</sup> POKAZANYEVA, *Mind Within Matter*, p. 320.

reintroduced to the world by René Descartes (1596–1650) in the 17th century<sup>9</sup>. Although the scientific community has long since disavowed the concept, it is worth noting that in the nineteenth century *aether* was a valid hypothesis in physics, seen as a medium for gravitational and electromagnetic forces in the world.

Similarly to Ākāśa, the term *aether* was adopted by the Theosophical Society and gained a new meaning, transforming from a medium for propagating light into a human aura that is visible to those with sufficient clairvoyance.<sup>10</sup> As such, it bears notable similarities with *Kosha* (Sanskrit *kósa*), the coverings of the Atman from Vedantic philosophy.<sup>11</sup> Given the efforts to replace original Indian terms with their Western equivalents, such as the aforementioned *Kosha* with the term *Etheric body*,<sup>12</sup> this might have been a conscious effort on the organization's part to grant greater legitimacy to their own terms.

When compared to the older form of *Ākāśa*, which denoted space, the term *Akasha* at that time lacked its archival function that is nowadays seen as its main feature. This changed with the rise of the Theosophical Society in 1875 and their subsequent efforts in bringing Indian concepts and ideas to the West.

It is up to debate whether the conversion of *Ākāśa* into the modern *Akasha* was initiated by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) herself or one of her contemporaries. The term certainly came up in her work, but it was still not in the form of a cosmic archive. Instead, it seemed to be the source of all existence, a sort of primordial element that bore some similarities to Vivekananda's own concept of *Ākāśa*. To quote:

For the Occultist “Space” and “Universe” are synonyms. In Space there is not Matter, Force, nor Spirit, but all that and much more. It is the One Element, and that one the Anima Mundi – Space, Ākāśa, Astral Light – the Root of Life which, in its eternal, ceaseless motion, like the out-and-in-breathing of one boundless ocean, evolves but to reabsorb all that lives and feels and thinks and has its being in it.<sup>13</sup>

Considering the radical change of meaning accompanying the conversion of *Ākāśa* into *Akasha*, however, it is obvious that the members of the Theosophical Society took great liberties with the original term and imbued it with a meaning it had not possessed before. In the perspective of at least some members of the society, however, they were merely repeating the truth that had already been present elsewhere.

<sup>9</sup> STEPHEN GAUKROGER, *René Descartes: The World and Other Writings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004, p. 11

<sup>10</sup> RUDOLF STEINER, *An Outline of Occult Science*, London: Rudolf Steiner Press 1909, p. 196–197.

<sup>11</sup> “Kosha” [online] <https://www.yogapedia.com/>, accessed January 2020, available online at <https://www.yogapedia.com/definition/5307/kosha>.

<sup>12</sup> “Man Visible and Invisible” [online] <https://www.anandgholap.net/index.html>, 2016, accessed January 2020, available online at [https://www.anandgholap.net/Man\\_Visible\\_And\\_Invisible-CWL.htm](https://www.anandgholap.net/Man_Visible_And_Invisible-CWL.htm).

<sup>13</sup> HELENA PETROVNA BLAVATSKY, *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. 3, London: Theosophical Publishing Company 1888, p. 314.

An example is *The Buddhist Catechism* (1881), written by Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907). As he was the co-founder of the Theosophical organization, it is clear that his words would be received with a measure of respect among his fellow members. Although his focus was primarily on Buddhism (to the point of being one of the most renowned converts of his century), it is certain that others within the society were at least aware of his usage of the term. To quote:

Early Buddhism then clearly held to a permanency of records in the Ākāsha, and the potential capacity of man to read the same when he has evolved to the stage of true individual enlightenment.<sup>14</sup>

The notion of the Akashic Records can already be traced in his text, including the option of a sufficiently enlightened individual reaching and accessing their content. The concept appears in his work twice more; in both cases as an explanation of a selected part of Buddhist teaching.

Q. Do Buddhists accept the theory that everything has been formed out of nothing by a Creator?

A. The Buddha taught that two things are causeless, viz., Ākāsha, and Nirvāna. Everything has come *out of* Ākāsha, in obedience to a law of motion inherent in it, and, after a certain existence, passes away. Nothing ever came out of nothing. We do not believe in miracles; hence we deny creation, and cannot conceive of a creation of something out of nothing. Nothing organic is eternal. Everything is in a state of constant flux, and undergoing change and reformation, keeping up the continuity according to the law of evolution.<sup>15</sup>

Olcott's comparison between Buddhism's cosmogony and the laws of physics is in line with his efforts to help the religion with its transition into the modern era. More importantly, however, there is insistence that the cosmos is a continuous process, rather than a temporary arrangement with a set beginning or end. Even the next instance of Akasha is used in a way that implies a constant motion of events, rather than a static order of things:

363. Q. Does Buddhism teach the unchangeableness of the visible universe; our earth, the sun, the moon, the stars, the mineral, vegetable, animal and human kingdoms?

A. No. It teaches that all are constantly changing, and all must disappear in course of time.

364. Q. Never to reappear?

A. Not so: the principle of evolution, guided by Karma, individual and collective, will evolve another universe with its contents, as our universe was evolved out of the Ākāsha.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> HENRY STEELE OLCOTT, *A Buddhist Catechism According to the Canon of Southern Church*, London: Trübner & Co 1881, p. 58.

<sup>15</sup> OLCOTT, *A Buddhist Catechism*, p. 74.

<sup>16</sup> OLCOTT, *A Buddhist Catechism*, p. 80.

By combining all of the above-mentioned statements, we get the concept of the Akashic Records as a place from which the universe was conceived, which also has an archival function for said universe. However, at the same time it would be premature to say that Olcott and his Catechism were the only possible factors behind the adoption of the Akashic Records. To consider the possibilities of other influences, a closer look at the state of contemporary sciences is required.

## Philosophy and physics in relation to the Akashic Records

As mentioned previously, the idea of the Akashic Records did not originate from India, and therefore it is necessary look elsewhere for the influence behind it. Surprisingly, some of this influence might be found in places that one would not normally associate with the metaphysical: Physics.

To confirm that concepts similar to the Akashic Records already existed at the time, one might name the Scottish physicists Balfour Stewart (1828–1887) and Peter Guthrie (1831–1901) as prominent examples. Their work *The Unseen Universe* (1875) proposes an idea of an unseen space that exists aside from the visible universe. To quote:

Nevertheless, we do not hesitate likewise to assert that the visible universe must, certainly in transformable energy, and probably in matter, come to an end. We cannot escape from this conclusion. But the principle of Continuity, upon which all such arguments are based, still demanding a continuance of the universe, we are forced to believe that there is something beyond that which is visible, or, to use the words of an old writer (which we have inscribed on our title-page), “the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” Looking back instead of forward – to the origin of this visible universe, rather than to its end, we are brought to a similar conclusion. If the visible universe is all that exists, then the first abrupt manifestation of it is as truly a break of continuity as its final overthrow.<sup>17</sup>

It must be noted that the two present their argument from a position that deems all existence has been created by a higher intelligence, as seen below:

Having thus classed our readers, they will now be anxious to learn our position. Let us begin by stating at once that we assume, as absolutely self-evident, the existence of a Deity who is the Creator of all things. “We are obliged,” says Herbert Spencer in his *First Principles*, “to regard every phenomenon as a manifestation of some Power by which we are acted upon; though omnipresence is unthinkable, yet, as experience discloses no bounds to the diffusion of phenomena, we are unable to think of limits to the presence of this Power; while the criticisms of science teach us that this Power is incomprehensible.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> BALFOUR STEWART, *The Unseen Universe*, London: Macmillan and Co.1875, p. 60.

<sup>18</sup> STEWART, *The Unseen Universe*, p. 43–44.

This sentiment was repeated in a later part of the book, specifically when expressing the eternal continuity of existence. To give an excerpt:

We claim it as the heritage of intelligence that there shall be an endless vista, reaching from eternity to eternity, in each link of which we shall be led only from one form of the conditioned to another, never from the conditioned to the unconditioned or absolute, which would be to us no better than an impenetrable intellectual barrier.

It has also been seen that in this endless chain of conditioned existence we cannot be satisfied with a make-believe universe, or one- consisting only of dead matter, but prefer a living, intelligent universe, in other words, one fully conditioned. Finally, our argument has led us to regard the production of the visible universe as brought about by an intelligent agency residing in the unseen.<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately, all this proves is that 19th century society possessed the concept of a separate dimension, which by itself would not suffice to define *Akasha* as it is known today. There is also the matter of their view of the universe which includes an active creating force behind its conception, which diverges from the more passive nature of the Akashic Records.

To truly understand the mindset that gave rise to the idea of a cosmic hub of information, it is important to examine the philosophical idea of determinism that dominated much of the scientific worldview up to the twentieth century.

Although there are many types of determinism, they share the common attributes of cause and effect. Simply put, there no event is motivated by chance; only by a sequence of set causes, which result in the given effect. So how does this tie in with the Akashic Records?

These cosmic archives themselves are a compendium of everything that has happened in the past, present, and future. Therefore, they operate under the notion that everything has a predestined path and that the world and everything in it will follow it, since if that were not the case, the entire idea of the Akashic Records would become obsolete.

Although determinism does not necessarily operate with the idea of predestination taken to such cosmic levels, a subsection of it did bring up the idea. This strict (or absolute) determinism was proposed primarily, if not exclusively, by Pierre Simon Laplace (1749–1827), most famously in the introduction to his *Essai philosophique sur les probabilités*, commonly known as Laplace's Demon:

We ought to then to regard the present state of the universe as the effect of its anterior state and as the cause of the one which to follow. Given for one instant an intelligence which could comprehend all the forces by which nature is animated and the respective situation of the beings who compose it – an intelligence sufficiently vast to submit these data to analysis – it would embrace in the same formula the movements of the greatest

---

<sup>19</sup> STEWART, *The Unseen Universe*, p. 157.

bodies of the universe and those of the lightest atom; for it, nothing would be uncertain and the future, as the past, would be present to its eyes.<sup>20</sup>

Simply put, Laplace proposes the idea of a super-intelligence that would be able to know all the forces and events transpiring in the world throughout both its history and future.<sup>21</sup> In theory, such a mind would have absolute knowledge of the universe and its structure; a state of being not unlike the one that would grant access to the Akashic Records. Although there is no clear confirmation that Laplace's Demon served as an inspiration for the concept of the Akashic Records, the similarities between the two seem too notable to be a mere coincidence.

Later Theosophists also seemed to be aware of determinism and its influence on the Akashic Records. For example, *Theosophy*, Vol. 21 (no. 7, 1933) states the following:

Anyone able to see with a fair degree of accuracy all the causes which have been set in motion toward a certain end, can predict with an accuracy proportional to the scope of his vision. There is nothing mysterious about this; all of us carry it out through every hour of our lives – in fact, we could not live without doing it.<sup>22</sup>

There are however a few key questions that could potentially undermine this hypothesis: What about alternate futures? If one were to obtain insight into the knowledge contained in the records, would they also be able to perceive possible events and futures? Or would the existence of the records already imply a predetermined path for everything in existence?

To answer these questions, the state of contemporary physics needs to be observed. The quantum physics that operate with the notion of parallel universes first came about in 1956 thanks to Hugh Everett<sup>23</sup> (although Erwin Schrödinger is credited with making the first known references to the concept several years earlier, in 1952) and only gained proper recognition much later. The fact that the Akashic Records came about in the late nineteenth century, more than fifty years prior to the first known theory of parallel universes, makes it rather obvious that in all probability, the Akashic Records were not imagined with this function in mind.

<sup>20</sup> PIERRE SIMON LAPLACE, *A Philosophical Essay on Probabilities*, translated by Frederick Wilson Truscott and Frederick Lincoln Emory, New York: Dover Publications 1951, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> "Laplace's Demon" [online], <http://www.informationphilosopher.com>, 2010, accessed February 2018, available online at [http://www.informationphilosopher.com/freedom/laplaces\\_demon.html](http://www.informationphilosopher.com/freedom/laplaces_demon.html).

<sup>22</sup> "Studies in Karma: Prevision, and Responsibility" [online], <http://blavatsky.net/Wisdomworld/additional>, 1933, accessed September 2019, available online at <http://blavatsky.net/Wisdomworld/additional/StudiesInKarma-Series/Prevision-Destination.html>.

<sup>23</sup> For more information see HUGH EVERETT, *The Theory of Universal Wave Function*, New Jersey: Princeton University 1956, 140 p.

Whether that remains to this day is another matter entirely, although admittedly one that is difficult to address, given the relative obscurity of the topic and the lack of material evidence pointing to a concrete answer.

There has been, however, a more recent effort towards marrying the physical and metaphysical once more. While more grounded in natural sciences than the original efforts of the Theosophical Society, it nonetheless acknowledges the possibility of the Akashic Records, as we will explain below.

## **Possible influence of Christianity**

All of what has been said above ought to provide a clear understanding of the origin and influences behind the Akashic Records. However, before examining how these archives manifested in recent times, there is still one possible influence that should not be overlooked: Christianity.

It is worth noting that Christianity was the native religion of many prominent Western Theosophists. At the same time, many of them questioned their faith or outright rejected it. The aforementioned Olcott is a prominent example, though far from being the only one. To cite at least one example, a letter written in 1881 directly states:

Neither our philosophy nor ourselves believe in a God, least of all in one whose pronoun necessitates a capital H. Our philosophy falls under the definition of Hobbes. It is preeminently the science of effects by their causes and of causes by their effects, and since it is also the science of things deduced from first principle, as Bacon defines it, before we admit any such principle we must know it, and have no right to admit even its possibility. Your whole explanation is based upon one solitary admission made simply for argument's sake in October last. You were told that our knowledge was limited to this our solar system: ergo as philosophers who desired to remain worthy of the name we could not either deny or affirm the existence of what you termed a supreme, omnipotent, intelligent being of some sort beyond the limits of that solar system.

But if such an existence is not absolutely impossible, yet unless the uniformity of nature's law breaks at those limits we maintain that it is highly improbable. Nevertheless we deny most emphatically the position of agnosticism in this direction, and as regards the solar system. Our doctrine knows no compromises. It either affirms or denies, for it never teaches but that which it knows to be the truth. Therefore, we deny God both as philosophers and as Buddhists. We know there are planetary and other spiritual lives, and we know there is in our system no such thing as God, either personal or impersonal. Parabrahm is not a God, but absolute immutable law, and Iswar is the effect of Avidya and Maya, ignorance based upon the great delusion. The word "God" was invented to designate the unknown cause of those effects which man has either admired or dreaded without understanding them, and since we claim and that we are able to prove what we

claim – i.e. the knowledge of that cause and causes we are in a position to maintain there is no God or Gods behind them.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, given the sheer diversity of beliefs held by the members of the Theosophical Society, as well as the movement's tendency to claim religious figures (including personas such as Jesus Christ or Siddhartha Gautama) as part of their supposedly ancient teachings, it is plausible for the movement to have been influenced by elements of various established religions including Christianity. While Buddhism and Hinduism are the obvious choices, given their popularity in the movement, there is one more possible source of influence on the formation of the Akashic Records that needs to be examined: Namely, predestination.

It is true that both operate under different worldviews, but at the same time, their agreement that at least some things are firmly predetermined might lead some to ask about their possible similarities. First, a definition of predestination must be established.

Predestination is a Christian doctrine stating that God has eternally chosen those whom he intends to save. This choice does not cancel the free will of humanity, as that would negate the entire premise of the moral choice that is expected of the humankind.<sup>25</sup>

Although one might try to draw parallels, predestination is a concept sharply distinct from both determinism and fatalism, which do not necessarily involve the theistic concept of a personal deity making conscious choices.<sup>26</sup> Determinism works by the notion that a cause in the present will result in a certain effect later on, but that is not how predestination views the world.

With predestination, the core principle is that not only does God have plans for the salvation of the world, but He also has an active role in the whole process, shaping and forming both events and people to bring such a plan to conclusion. This does not automatically imply divine determinism, or specifically that there is only possible future, the one God intentionally ordained, although these beliefs are not mutually exclusive. It is also important to note that there is more than one type of predestination. One need only compare Saint Augustine's single predestination where God only determined who would be saved, to John Calvin's double predestination, in which God has eternally set who will be saved and who will be damned.<sup>27</sup>

How would this compare with the notion of the Akashic Records? Within the scope of predestination, God is an active force that not only foretells events, but also

<sup>24</sup> A. T. BARKER, "LETTER No. X" [online], [http://www.phx-ult-lodge.org/mahatma\\_letters.htm#No.%20X%201](http://www.phx-ult-lodge.org/mahatma_letters.htm#No.%20X%201), accessed October 2019, available online at [http://www.phx-ult-lodge.org/mahatma\\_letters.htm](http://www.phx-ult-lodge.org/mahatma_letters.htm).

<sup>25</sup> KARL RAHNER and HERBERT VORGMILLER, *Kleines theologisches Wörterbuch*, Prague: Zvon 1996, p. 262.

<sup>26</sup> "Predestination", in LINDSAY JONES (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 5, 2nd ed., Michigan: Thomson Gale 2005, p. 3203.

<sup>27</sup> JOHN CALVIN, *Concerning the eternal predestination of God*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1997, p. 105–107.

makes them happen. On the other hand, the Akashic Records were never even hinted to be anything other than a great compendium of all events present within the universe. To put it in other words, the main difference is that of an active force on one hand and a completely passive presence on the other.

The Theosophists themselves actively denied any connection with predestination in their works, despite the fact that their own version was not so different in its claim. As Gottfried de Purucker (1874–1942) put it during the Theosophical Forum of 1943:

So in answer to the question, Does Theosophy teach Predestination? The answer is an emphatic negative. No. But we do indeed teach destiny, which every man weaves for himself, around himself, and from which there is no escape, for it is the fruiting of the seeds sown by our own volition or choice. We do teach the doctrine, sublime and grand, as already stated, of man's free will, relatively so at least, dependent upon his evolutionary status, and of the inescapable Destiny that dogs the footsteps of the evil-doer, and showers blessings upon the doer of good. The one, retribution, is as inescapable as the other, compensation for the good that we have sown.<sup>28</sup>

As can be seen from the quote above, Theosophy denied teaching anything related to predestination, despite the fact that its focus on free will and its consequences was similar to the Christian doctrine in this particular regard. The main difference was that, within the theosophical view, the soul would be reincarnated, instead of heading for a final pre-determined destination. However, their common ground can be narrowed down to the fact that at least some events are already eternally destined to happen. To quote the aforementioned *Theosophy*:

For any event to happen at all, there must have been a definite moment when it became inevitable.<sup>29</sup>

Overall, while there does not seem to be much in the way of solid evidence for predestination influencing the idea of the Akashic Records, the fact that Theosophists needed to renounce the concept proves at least active knowledge or familiarity with the topic. The issue of Christian influence on Theosophy and its doctrines is a highly complex one, especially after the death of the movement's founders and the subsequent schism.

<sup>28</sup> GOTTFRIED DE PURUCKER, "Predestination" [online], [https://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/ts/h\\_tsintro.htm](https://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/ts/h_tsintro.htm), 1943, accessed July 2019, available online at [https://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/forum/£21n04p161\\_predestination.htm](https://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/forum/£21n04p161_predestination.htm).

<sup>29</sup> "Studies in Karma: Prevision, and Responsibility", <http://blavatsky.net/Wisdomworld/additional/StudiesInKarma-Series/Prevision-Destination.html>.

## Eternal continuation of existence within Akasha

Ervin Lázsló (\*1932) is a Hungarian philosopher and systems theorist. He is also a known proponent of the Quantum consciousness (additionally known as quantum mind) theory; a system of hypotheses proposing that quantum mechanical phenomena and superposition could contribute to forming the foundation of an explanation of consciousness.

More importantly, Lázsló presented an argument that the quantum vacuum (supposedly containing information on history from the Big Bang onward) itself is also a consciousness. To put it in simpler terms, everything in the universe has a consciousness, even at the level of sub-atomic particles. The state of the universe as it is known is therefore intentional instead of accidental. In such a view, this helps explain the sheer mathematical improbability of all existence possessing the form it has. As the philosopher put it:

Metaverse cosmologies have enormous explanatory potential. They can explain in principle how our universe came by the remarkable properties it actually has. Such an explanation is needed, because a universe such as ours – with galaxies and stars, and life on this and presumably other life-supporting planets – is not likely to have come about as a matter of serendipity. According to Roger Penrose's calculations, the probability of hitting on our universe by a random selection from among the alternative-universe possibilities is one in  $10^{10^{123}}$ . This is an inconceivably large number, indicating an improbability of astronomical dimensions. Indeed, Penrose himself speaks of the birth of our universe as a "singularity" where the laws of physics do not hold. But if our particular universe is so staggeringly improbable, how did it come about? The explanation we can derive from Metaverse cosmologies is simple and powerful.

We know that the vacuum fluctuations that preceded the birth of our universe were precisely such that a life-bearing universe could come about. We also know that these fluctuations were not created by the primal explosion known as the Big Bang – that stupendous event only amplified them. The fluctuations that led to our staggeringly coherent universe were already present when our universe was born; they were there in its vacuum "prespace".<sup>30</sup>

In summary, the universe and everything contained within it are not a result of chance (as given the quote above, that would be extremely unlikely), but the result of an informed process. In addition, it is the A-field, also called the *Akashic field*, which serves as the information-carrying plane that observes not just the current universe, but also all those past and present (called *the Metaverse* within the book itself).

Prespace, in Lázsló's interpretation, is the notion that the Big Bang started the universe, and the Big Crunch, which will happen when the universe goes into reverse

<sup>30</sup> ERVIN LASZLO, *Science and the Akashic Field: An Integral Theory of Everything*, Rochester: Inner Traditions 2004, p. 68–69.

and collapses back onto itself, is only a part of many cycles of universes just like ours appearing and disappearing, just like the subatomic particles in our world.

Lázsló believed that information could be transferred from one cycle to the next, which explains how the precise numbers for gravity, electromagnetism etc. came to be so exact when there has not been enough time for these to form randomly. These numbers are transferred from previous universes.<sup>31</sup>

It should come as no surprise that the Hindu view all of existence in a similarly cyclical way, even if the reasoning behind it is different. Yet it is here where Lázsló helps us bridge the gap between Indian philosophy and Western thinking, specifically by equating the quantum vacuum with the Akashic Records themselves. Within his work, he called them the A-field, a newly rediscovered information field of the universe:

Beyond the puzzle-filled world of the mainstream sciences, a new concept of the universe is emerging. The established concept is transcended; in its place comes a new/old concept: the informed universe, rooted in the rediscovery of ancient tradition's Akashic Field as the vacuum-based holofield. In this concept the universe is a highly integrated, coherent system, much like a living organism. Its crucial feature is information that is generated, conserved, and conveyed by and among all its parts. This feature is entirely fundamental. It transforms a universe that is blindly groping its way from one phase of its evolution to the next into a strongly interconnected system that builds on the information it has already generated.<sup>32</sup>

The A-field was meant to exist alongside other already known fields, namely the gravitational field (G-field), the electromagnetic field (EM-field), and the various nuclear and quantum fields. Instead of being metaphysical in its essence, the A-field was simply another natural part of the universe, one ever-present constant in the cosmic cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

This crossover between science and spiritual tradition has curious implications for the existence of the Akashic Records. Almost as if coming full circle back to the Theosophical Society and Helena Blavatsky, the option of gaining access to those universal archives has opened again. To quote Storoy's article once more:

Ervin Laszlo's theory says we are therefore linked to all people who have ever lived, and we can get access to them by accessing the Akashic field. This can explain life after death, because the past has never gone away, telling us that the past is ever present in everything we do. It clearly points to a universe where all is one and everything is linked. And if we tune ourselves into the Akashic field, we can access abilities that appear to be supernatural, but are in fact completely natural. Activities such as meditation can help us plug into

<sup>31</sup> DAVID STOROY, "Brain-heart" [online], <https://www.scienceandnonduality.com>, 2015, accessed March 2019, available online at <https://www.scienceandnonduality.com/article/akashic-field-and-consciousness>.

<sup>32</sup> LASZLO, *Science and the Akashic Field*, p. 112.

the Akashic field and become much more than we are at present. Science and spirituality do not need to be set against each other as we have tended to think for so long.<sup>33</sup>

Despite the notable similarities to Blavatsky's work, there is not enough evidence to support the notion that the author derived his concepts from Theosophy and its teachings. Nevertheless, Laszlo is a prominent example of how concepts such as the Akashic Records were still kept alive even in the field of science throughout the 20th century.

## Conclusion

*Ākāśa* underwent a long series of transformations, first in India itself and then once again under the influence of the Theosophical Society. By the time it became a part of the Western culture, the Akashic Records served as an intersection between quantum theory, metaphysical spirituality, and Indian-inspired philosophy.

However, it should also be said that absolutely no one was interested in every single layer that had been piled onto the concept of *Ākāśa* since 1875. The Theosophical Society, for example, was interested only in the metaphysical realm that could be viewed solely through the eyes of the few sufficiently advanced individuals like Helena Blavatsky in order to perform clairvoyance.

On the other side, there were scientists like Nikola Tesla (1856–1943), for whom *Ākāśa* was a theoretical possibility of advancement, especially in relation to matter and energy. It is also no secret that Tesla was an acquaintance of Swami Vivekananda, who in his teachings wished to reconcile modern science with Vedantic theories and cosmology.<sup>34</sup>

Unfortunately for *Ākāśa*, the same problems that originally plagued the Indian concept persisted even after its Western reimagining. There were numerous views on what the concept actually was, but absolutely no efforts were made to unify the diverse interpretations into a single meaning.

This inevitably resulted in the term eventually being abandoned by the scientific community and thus losing whatever was left of its connection to physical reality.

What is known as the Akashic Records is a metaphysical interpretation of *Ākāśa*, brought about by the influence of the Theosophical Society. Whether it was intended that way or not is impossible to say, but what is important to remember is that the form commonly known today is merely one of several variations an already ambiguous term took after it gained recognition. It may not be possible to discern its historical origin from modern fiction with absolute certainty, but at least the concept of

<sup>33</sup> STOROY, "Brain-heart" [online], <https://www.scienceandnonduality.com/article/akashic-field-and-consciousness>.

<sup>34</sup> "Nikola Tesla and Swami Vivekananda" [online], *Tesla Society*, accessed January 2019, available online at [http://www.teslasociety.com/tesla\\_and\\_swami.htm](http://www.teslasociety.com/tesla_and_swami.htm).

the Akashic Records can always be used as a warning example about the dangers of loose interpretations.

## REFERENCES

- “Akashic record” [online], <https://www.britannica.com>, 2015, accessed January 2020, available online at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Akashic-record#ref260257>.
- “Man Visible and Invisible” [online], *Anand Gholap*, 2016, accessed January 2020, available online at [https://www.anandgholap.net/Man\\_Visible\\_And\\_Invisible-CWL.htm](https://www.anandgholap.net/Man_Visible_And_Invisible-CWL.htm).
- “Nikola Tesla and Swami Vivekananda” [online], *Tesla Society*, June 2008, accessed January 2019, available online at <https://idoc.pub/documents/nikola-tesla-and-swami-vivekananda-j3no5y6j7x4d>.
- “Studies in Karma: Prevision, and Responsibility” [online], Blavatsky.net, 1933, accessed September 2019, available online at <http://blavatsky.net/Wisdomworld/additional/StudiesInKarma-Series/Prevision-Destination.html>.
- BARKER, A. T., “LETTER No. X” [online], [http://www.phx-ult-lodge.org/mahatma\\_letters.htm#No.%20X%20I](http://www.phx-ult-lodge.org/mahatma_letters.htm#No.%20X%20I), May 2008, accessed October 2019, available online at [http://www.phx-ult-lodge.org/mahatma\\_letters.htm](http://www.phx-ult-lodge.org/mahatma_letters.htm).
- BLAVATSKY, HELENA PETROVNA, *The Secret Doctrine – Volume 3*, London: Theosophical Publishing Company 1888, 628 p.
- CALVIN, JOHN, *Concerning the eternal predestination of God*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1997, 191 p.
- EVERETT, HUGH, *The Theory of Universal Wave Function*, New Jersey: Princeton University 1956, 140 p.
- GAUKROGER, STEPHEN, *René Descartes: The World and Other Writings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004, 209 p.
- IANNONE, A. PABLO, *Dictionary of World Philosophy*, New York: Taylor & Francis 2001, 554 p.
- JONES, LINDSAY (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 5, 2nd ed., Thomson Gale 2005, 3579 p.
- LAPLACE, PIERRE SIMON, *A Philosophical Essay on Probabilities*, translated by FREDERICK WILSON TRUSCOTT and FREDERICK LINCOLN EMORY, New York: Dover Publications 1951, 196 p.
- LASZLO, ERVIN, *Science and the Akashic Field: An Integral Theory of Everything*, Rochester: Inner Traditions 2004, 205 p.
- NYANATUSITA, BHIKKU, and HELLMUTH HECKER, *The Life of Nyanatolika Thera: The Biography of a Western Buddhist Pioneer*, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society 2008, 255 p.
- NYANTILOKA, *Buddhist Dictionary*, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society 1998, 402 p.
- OLCOTT, HENRY STEELE, *A Buddhist Catechism According to the Canon of Southern Church*, London: Trübner & Co 1881, 106 p.
- POKAZANYEVA, ANNA, “Mind Within Matter: Science, The Occult, and the (Meta)Physics of Ether and Akasha”, *Zygon* 51 (2, 2016): p. 318–346.
- SHAH, PRAVIN K. “Six Universal Substances or Entities” [online], *Jain Study Center of North Carolina*, 2002, accessed May 2019, available online at <https://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~pluralsm/affiliates/jainism/jainedu/6dravya.htm>.
- PURUCKER, GOTTFRIED DE, “Predestination” [online], *Theosociety.org*, 1943, accessed July 2019, available online at [https://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/forum/f21n04p161\\_predestination.htm](https://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/forum/f21n04p161_predestination.htm).

RAHNER, KARL, and HERBERT VORGRIMLER, *Kleines theologisches Wörterbuch*, Prague: Zvon 1996, 491 p.

STEINER, RUDOLF, *An Outline of Occult Science*, London: Rudolf Steiner Press 1909, 205 p.

STEWART, BALFOUR, *The Unseen Universe*, London: Macmillan and Co. 1875, 198 p.

STOROY, DAVID, "Brain-Heart" [online], *Science and Nonduality*, February 2015, accessed March 2019, available online at <https://www.scienceandnonduality.com/article/akashic-field-and-consciousness>.

VIVEKANANDA, SWAMI, *Raja Yoga*, Leeds: Celepha's Press 2003, 297 p.

"Kosha" [online], *Yogapedia.com*, December 2007, accessed January 2020, available online at <https://www.yogapedia.com/definition/5307/kosha>.

## Soviet Atheism as a Science, a Worldview, and a Social Discipline (Review)

Oleg Kyselov

Victoria Smolkin's book *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* is based on the study of archive materials and interviews with former scientific atheists. The author studied 16 different archives in Kyiv (Ukraine), Moscow, Saint Petersburg (Russia), and Vilnius (Lithuania). She also conducted 14 interviews, including with some respondents who cannot provide additional information any longer, because they have since passed away. These include Nikolai Gordienko (1929–2011), Evgraf Duluman (1928–2013), and Nikolai Zakovich (1931–2017). Victoria Smolkin undoubtedly also used the available literature on scientific atheism, documents of the Communist Party of the USSR, and other sources in her research.

At the beginning of her book, Smolkin presents the three existing narratives on religion and atheism in the USSR: 1) antireligious repressions; 2) the role of atheism in the project of utopianism and cultural revolution, and 3) Soviet religious policy as a form of secular modernity. These three narratives have appeared chronologically, but all of them regard Soviet communism as a totalitarian political religion (p. 7). This is also the interpretation of the book under review. Unlike her predecessors, however, Smolkin considers atheism to be an important part of the Soviet ideology and talks about atheistic upbringing.

The book accounts for Soviet atheism from 1917 till 1991. Smolkin suggests that during the period of militant atheism (until 1943), religion was considered a political problem, but in the period of scientific atheism (starting in 1954), it was seen as a worldview problem. The global rise of religion in the public space (starting at the end of the 1970s) restored it as a political problem for the Communist party and ideological activists.

The focus of the book is directed at Khrushchev's and Brezhnev's times. Atheism itself is considered in three different forms: as a science, a worldview, and a social discipline. In the first case, the author implies science was an instrument of atheist propaganda. Smolkin illustrates this with the case of using cosmic themes in atheist propaganda. Atheism was part of the scientific and materialist worldview and appealed to human reason. But the author, using her study of primary sources, confirms that the Communist Party and ideological activists recognized this was not sufficient to constitute effective propaganda and that propagandists would also need to appeal to human emotion. That was the way Soviet atheism transformed from a brutal critic of religion towards an optimistic non-religious worldview. The appeal to emotions in

religious rites provoked the Communist Party to develop new non-religious rites and introduce them to Soviet society. The author found out that even though new rites were an integral part of life in the late Soviet Union, its citizens continued to take part in religious rituals as well. She explains this with a shared ideological indifference, on the one hand, and with an interest in religion as a cultural phenomenon on the other. People participated in church services and sacraments – as the author of the reviewed book discovered – not because of religious motives but because of their aesthetic and entertainment value. People treated going to church, as Smolkin writes, in the same way as going to the theatre or circus.

Soviet atheism, in the author's opinion, was not about secularism or secularization but the conversion of Soviet citizens to atheism. The idea of replacement is stressed throughout the whole book – the sacred space of religion was supposed to be filled with its secular analogue (museums and planetariums instead of temples, cosmonauts instead of saints and prophets, scientific atheists instead of priest and preachers, Soviet rites instead of church rituals). But Smolkin also states that “Soviet atheism was not secular because secularism can tolerate indifference” (p. 241), but “[f]or Soviet atheism, however, the privatization of religion was never acceptable in the long term, and indifference and neutrality were unacceptable positions” (p. 242).

Smolkin compares the situation with religion in the USSR to the fate of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow. The Cathedral was destroyed in 1931, to be replaced with the Palace of the Soviets. Eventually, a swimming pool was built there instead, in 1960. In the same way, atheism attempted to fill the space exempted from religion, but it left an empty space instead. Soviet citizens, liberated from religion, didn't automatically become atheists. As the Soviet sociological surveys demonstrated, a significant part of the Soviet population had become indifferent towards religion and atheism simultaneously.

Unquestionably, the book under review will be interesting not only for scholars focused on atheism and the antireligious policy in the USSR. The book is written in a sufficiently dynamic way, constantly changing its focus from specific examples to a general image of the situation and back. The used archive materials turn the book into unique and fascinating research which reflects the various aspects of Soviet society, culture, and ideology. I am convinced that Smolkin's book will attract the attention of historians, anthropologists, and sociologists, as well as scholars of religion, culture, and politics.

## REFERENCES

SMOLKIN, VICTORIA, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2018, 360 p.

<https://doi.org/10.14712/25704893.2020.4>