
Reenchanting Nature: Modern Western Shamanism and Nineteenth-Century Thought

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In the second half of the twentieth century there emerged in North America and Europe a complex phenomenon on the fringes of anthropology, science, and the so-called New Age that is often referred to as “neoshamanism.” Part of a larger discourse of nature-based spirituality, contemporary western shamanism is deeply rooted in European and North American history of thought. It can be analyzed in the light of a dialectic process of “disenchantment” and “resacralization” of the world. After having scrutinized neoshamanic concepts of nature, the article discusses paradigmatic examples for the existence of currents that contest disenchantment and fight the tendency within modern western culture to desacralize nature. It is shown that the nineteenth century must be considered the formative phase of contemporary neoshamanic nature discourse.

DESACRALIZATION REVISITED

IN A RECENT ARTICLE on “modernity,” Gustavo Benavides points to the fact that the increasing separation of sacred and material realms is a characteristic of modernity. Nonindustrial societies, in contrast, are marked

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An earlier version of this article was presented at the Annual Meeting of the AAR in Boston in 1999. I owe much to the interesting discussions of the “mysticism” group there. In addition, special thanks go to Don Handelman (Jerusalem), Bron Taylor (Oshkosh, WI), Antoine Faivre (Paris), Roberte N. Hamayon (Paris), Jan N. Bremmer (Groningen), Michael York (Bath), Ulla Johansen (Cologne), Jörg Rüpke (Erfurt), Jonathan Horwitz (Copenhagen), Annette Høst (Copenhagen), and—last but not least—Hans G. Kippenberg (Bremen). All of them helped me a lot in clarifying my argument and escaping (at least) some of the major pitfalls.

Journal of the American Academy of Religion December 2002, Vol. 70, No. 4, pp. 771–799.
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by a concept that might be called a “symbolic, or perhaps more accurately a sacramental view of reality” (Benavides: 198), in which the universe is not seen as consisting of discrete domains but, rather, as more or less unified. In modern Europe this integrative concept stands in contrast to the separation of the sacred and the material: “The differentiation of domains that characterizes modernity made it in the long run impossible, or at least illegitimate, to engage in activities that mingled the increasingly distinct religious and material realms. But it is necessary to emphasize that the extrication of religion from the material world was, and still is, a contested process” (Benavides: 198).¹

Benavides’s approach can be easily combined with Max Weber’s concept of *disenchantment*. The former correctly observes that modernity is characterized by a self-referential reflexivity, in which the domains of culture are disembedded and newly ordered. It is important to note that this did not entail the suspension of the “sacred” but, rather, the existence of multiple modernities (Benavides: 189). Weber, for his part, interpreted the genesis of modernity as the result of a religious process. As is well known, he proposed that the disenchantment of the world provided room for the subjective search for meaning and significance. In the introduction to his “Economic Ethic of the World Religions” Weber argues that the unity of the “primitive image of the world, in which everything was concrete magic,” was transformed by modernity into a dichotomy or, rather, a dialectic of rational cognition and mastery of nature versus something Weber calls “mystic experiences”; and he concludes: “The inexpressible contents of such experiences remain the only possible ‘beyond,’ added to the mechanism of a world robbed of Gods” (from Gerth and Mills: 282). Weber was fully aware of the fact that the world’s disenchantment has always been challenged by mystic, intellectualized, or private religious reasoning (see Breuer). Today we are inclined to call this “esotericism” or “New Age religion,” but, as Hans G. Kippenberg reminds us, “if we replace ‘fundamentalism’ by Weber’s ‘sect,’ or ‘New Age’ by Buber’s ‘mysticism,’ we suddenly rediscover a theory assuming a significance of certain religious traditions for inhabitants of the modern world” (2000: 240).

The notion of a diachronic development of western attitudes toward nature is not new, of course. But it is usually not applied to the twentieth-century phenomenon called “neoshamanism,” which scholars often describe in terms of degeneration, syncretism, capitalism, “instant religion,” or hybridity. In contrast, this article wants to show that modern western

¹ As for the prehistory of this thesis, see Horton’s interesting remarks, especially in his 1967 article, “African Traditional Thought and Western Science” (1993, reprint: 197–258).

shamanism, as I prefer to call it, can be understood as a specific counter-reaction to modern tendencies toward the exclusion or sublimation of the “sacred” (whatever that might be). Being part and parcel of a specific religious reaction to modernity, it carries on philosophical and religious concepts that have long been a current of western *Geistesgeschichte*.

SHAMANISMS OLD AND NEW

Shamanism has fascinated European and North American culture for the past 300 years. The first who brought news from the vast steppes of northern Eurasia to the West, along with stories describing exotic rituals, were missionaries, traders, and travelers. During the eighteenth century there already had developed a more or less fixed image of “shamanism” as a specific type of religion. For most enlighteners the shaman was a model for irrational behavior (here, we come across the “disenchantment frontier”), and Catherine the Great even wrote a comedy entitled *Der sibirische Schaman, ein Lustspiel* (1786), in which she tries to ridicule shamanism and lead her subjects to a new age of enlightenment. But this was only one side of the coin, and the counterreaction was soon to emerge.² For quite a few European enlighteners—among them J. G. Herder, W. von Goethe, and Victor Hugo—the shaman was a religious virtuoso, a reminder of those ancient ecstasies and artists who were able to transgress ordinary reality by means of music and poetry. The most prominent figure in this European imagination was Orpheus (see Flaherty).

Roberte N. Hamayon (1998: 179–181) has labeled the three-step history of approaches to the shaman’s behavior during the past 300 years *devilization*, *medicalization*, and *idealization*. Although there surely exist examples for such a process, this description obscures the fact that western attitudes toward shamanism have been ambivalent from the beginning. Hence, Karl-Heinz Kohl’s notion of “refutation and desire” (1987, see also 1981) seems more suitable for understanding the characteristics of modernity’s appropriation of the shaman. Descriptions of shamanism always carried with them an element of fascination that was made explicit when Mircea Eliade in 1951 put forth his new construction of the shaman as a trance specialist (Noel: 26–41; see also Hamayon 1993, 1998, with a refutation of Hultkrantz’s famous definition). Now, shamanism appeared as a kind of anthropological constant, an ensemble of religious practices and doctrines that enabled certain socially discernible persons to interrelate with spiritual entities on behalf of their community. Eliade

² As McMahan has shown, the counterreaction was indeed an integral part of enlightenment itself.

must be addressed as the major “turntable” between nineteenth-century intellectual discourse and the popular appropriation of shamanism in the second half of the twentieth century.

The problems connected to definitions of shamanism, to exploration and mythmaking, are enormous. But they are not the primary issue of this article.³ They only provide the background of my approach that deals with the new appreciation of shamanism in modern western culture. It was in the 1960s that the shamanic discourse in North America made a decisive step in a new direction when the so-called New Age movement discovered shamanism and made it a major reference tool for its worldview.⁴ Inspired by Mircea Eliade, C. G. Jung, and Joseph Campbell, the shaman became an indication of a new understanding of humanity’s relation to nature, of man’s ability to access spiritual levels of reality, and of leading a respectful life toward the “sacred web of creation.” Henceforth, shamanism was no longer regarded as a spiritual path limited only to “classical shamanic cultures.” Instead, by substituting the western positivistic and mechanistic attitude toward reality and nature with a holistic or vitalist one, shamanism was considered available to everyone—even to those in urban contexts that are estranged from nature.

From this situation a phenomenon emerged that is called “neo-shamanism” by most scholars. Because of its biased tone, practitioners usually do not feel very comfortable with this label. As Annette Høst (2001) argues, “modern western shamanism” (or, for her part, even “modern European shamanism”) would be much more appropriate. I agree with this argument.

Despite its complexity, several characteristics of the phenomenon are discernible:

1. Starting with the seminal work of Carlos Castaneda, the popularization of academic knowledge became an important feature of modern western shamanism. Most major shamanic protagonists hold a degree in anthropology (e.g., Castaneda, Michael Harner, Joan Halifax, Nevill Drury, Steven Foster, Jonathan Horwitz, Felicitas Goodman, Gala Naumova) and try to combine this education with a spiritual practice outside the academia. Furthermore, what can be called the “interference” between academic research and religious practicing entailed a

³ A good survey of previous works is presented in Siikala and Hoppál. For a critical evaluation, see Taussig, Hutton, and also (although his introduction of Merlin as shaman seems strange to me) Noel.

⁴ Throughout this article I use the term *discourse* to describe a complex situation that is characterized by conscious and unconscious negotiations, power relations (in the Foucauldian sense), and debates applied to all levels of social action.

- transformation of “classical, indigenous shamanism” (if there is such), when native people began to read ethnographic accounts and reacted to anthropological systematization (see Atkinson: 322–23; Vitebsky).
2. From both religious and sociological points of view, modern western shamanism has a lot in common with neopagan groups (see York). Many features of Native American traditions or Celtic and North European religions, along with Wiccan chants and natural magic’s ritualizing, form the spiritual background of neoshamanic ritual practice. For instance, Høst, of the Scandinavian Center for Shamanic Studies, includes in her shamanic workshops divination and trance rituals adopted from northern European pagan tradition (such as *seidr*; see Høst 1997; Lindquist: 122–183; cf. Pike: 211).
 3. Modern western shamanism is closely related to western concepts of nature and religion, which were newly appreciated within the New Age scene. Although with regard to New Age in general this *longue durée* has been recognized at least by some scholars (see especially Hanegraaff and now also Hammer), in the case of shamanism most interpretations fail to recognize this important aspect.⁵
 4. Comparing it with indigenous shamanisms, it is noteworthy that modern western shamanism—at least in its more New Age emphasis (Hammer: 136–139)—tends to deny the reality of intrinsically nefarious spirits. Furthermore, it is oriented toward personal and spiritual empowerment among practitioners. Hence, the role of the community is of less importance than it is in shamanism’s more traditional context. But despite these points of comparison (and contrary to Hammer’s oversimplification), Piers Vitebsky’s remarks are certainly correct:

It is no longer possible to make a watertight distinction between “traditional” shamanistic societies (a mainstay of the old ethnographic literature and of comparative religion), and the new wave of neo-shamanist movements (still barely studied in depth). . . . [T]he shamanic revival is now reappearing in the *present* of some of these remote tribes—only now these are neither remote nor tribal. (184)

As can be seen from this short list of characteristics, the neoshamanic “scene” is a cultic milieu of its own (see Kürti), with several points of

⁵ There are two monographs dealing extensively with (European) neoshamanism (Jakobsen; Lindquist). Although both are valuable contributions, they do not offer a historical explanation; furthermore, Jakobsen’s analysis is distorted by a preconceived attitude toward her “object,” Jonathan Horwitz, of the Scandinavian Center for Shamanic Studies, who did not authorize her account (contrasting Lindquist’s). Another illuminating source is Cruden 1995. Most shorter academic contributions concentrate on the question of neoshamanism’s authenticity and a comparison with “real” shamanism.

overlap with both contemporary western paganism and New Age currents. Nevertheless, it is advisable to discern between modern western shamanism in its wider and its narrower senses. For the latter, Carlos Castaneda's books are of paramount importance. Another major figure in this regard is anthropologist and practitioner Michael Harner, who coined the term *core shamanism*, which is a simple indicator of some basic shamanic characteristics found—as Harner argues—in a variety of traditional settings.

Michael J. Harner and the Foundation for Shamanic Studies

In 1979, Michael J. Harner, who had earned his Ph.D. in anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, founded the Center for Shamanic Studies. Having resigned his professorship—at Columbia, Yale, Berkeley, and the New School for Social Research in New York—Harner renamed this nonprofit organization in 1987 the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (FSS). Subsequently, an international network was established in order to secure the quality of the teaching, to enable grassroots work, and to distribute literature, music, and shamanic paraphernalia. Today, the FSS is present in industrialized countries around the world, but its major branches are located in North America and Europe. The constitutional aims of the foundation are threefold: preservation of shamanic cultures and wisdom around the world, study of the original shamanic peoples and their traditions, and teaching shamanic knowledge for the benefit of the earth (Uccusic: 269–273). This last point in particular has raised some dispute because the FSS even offers scholarships to natives to regain their own shamanic heritage.

Doubtlessly, the FSS is a kind of “center of gravity” for contemporary shamanic discourse. Several other groups have adopted the “core shamanism” constructed by Harner and organize their course programs in a similar way. For Europe, the Scandinavian Center for Shamanic Studies, which is run by Jonathan Horwitz (who had been collaborating with Harner for over ten years) and Annette Høst, has gained particular influence. If one reviews the spiritual practices of modern western shamanism within the FSS and related groups, several crucial features are to be mentioned:⁶ The first step—and, therefore, the obligatory basic course's content—is to learn the shamanic journey. By beating a large frame drum, an altered state of consciousness (not necessarily a trance) is induced, enabling the participants to send consciousness's focus through an entrance from this—visible—reality into the lower or upper world. There, they meet their power

⁶ Basic for the following are Drury, Uccusic, Harner, and Cowan. For a scholarly perspective, see Jakobsen and Lindquist. Lindquist's dissertation includes detailed descriptions of the seminary's activities and biographical notes about the participants. It is worth noting that the “constructions” of shamanic biographies converge to a high degree with the results of Stenger's study.

animals, which subsequently are addressed as their most important helpers and teachers. Later, when the power animal is performed by song and dance—now the rattle is the primary instrument—the alliance between the shaman and the respective spiritual entity is further deepened.

During their journey to the lower or upper world the practitioners encounter more personal helping spirits and teachers who later stand beside them when they make journeys for other people. For those clients, the shamanizing person looks for either a power animal or a helping spirit offering its advice for the respective problem. Those entities are then blown into the client's chest or forehead.

The ability to journey shamanically and the deep contact with helpers from the "other world" are essential propositions for the neoshamanic work that can be called therapeutic.⁷ One possible aim is to retrieve soul parts that had been lost by trauma and so forth (cf. Ingerman 1991, 1993). On other occasions bodily, mental, or spiritual illnesses are "sucked out" of the client. A journey can also be carried out in order to ask for help in "the other world." The accompaniment of dying persons before and after death also is an important field of neoshamanic practice. Finally, the topic of *deep ecology* or *spiritual ecology* has gained growing attention in the last decade. This work includes not only communication with plants, stones, or other entities that the animistic worldview considers to be alive but also healing work for energetically disturbed places or even the whole planet (see below).

In addition, adaptations of indigenous traditions by Westerners are related to the neoshamanic movement. A broad reception of Vision Quests, the Sun Dance, and other religious features of the Native Americans has taken place, mostly in the United States and Canada (see, among many others, Andrews [cf. Drury: 87–92]; Foster and Little; Meadows; Moon-dance; Tedlock and Tedlock; Wall; Wesselman). People in Europe, for their part, have tried to bind their practice of shamanism to old Celtic semantics (Cowan; Cruden 1998; Jones; MacEowen; cf. the *seidr* ritual above). So, after having sketched the background and main characteristics of shamanic activities within modern western culture, I now turn to the issue of nature, which demonstrably is a key to understanding contemporary shamanic discourse and locating it in a long-standing tradition.

CONCEPTS OF NATURE IN NEOSHAMANISM

The central leitmotiv of contemporary western shamanism is nature. This by all means deserves an explanation, for in most of the older eth-

⁷ The following examples are chosen from the 1998–99 program of the Scandinavian Center for Shamanic Studies in Copenhagen.

nographies dealing with indigenous shamanism no specific concept of “nature” occurs. It even seems difficult to transfer this western term to cultures that do not have such a word in the first place. It was only recently that people from an indigenous background began to explain their shamanism with regard to their specific relationship to nature or environmental consciousness (see, e.g., Schlehe and Weber: 113–114; Vitebsky: 185–193).

My central thesis is that the concept of nature prominent in neoshamanic discourse is a direct successor of western mysticism and philosophy of nature, whose relevant currents of thought had their “high time” (roughly) in antiquity, during the Renaissance, and in nineteenth-century German idealism (Böhme gives a good overview; see also Faivre and Zimmermann). The early-twentieth-century “rebirth” of *Naturphilosophie* and the so-called New Age science, for their part, owe a lot to romantic metaphysics and transcendentalism. To illuminate those traditions, I shall first describe some important features of modern western shamanism’s attitudes toward nature. After that I shall compare them with Schelling’s philosophy of nature and the romantic pantheistic discourses, including the American transcendentalist view of nature.

At this point, one may ask what the contemporary American (and even the European) shamanic discourse has to do with German discussions between 1800 and 1850. Are those authors really exempla in the way Jonathan Z. Smith (xi–xii) describes them, or is this an arbitrary lineage of thought? In order to justify this construction of lineages, three points should not be forgotten: First of all, the image of the shaman as a religious specialist for the “other world,” for nature and art, is the product of European imagination as early as the eighteenth century. Second, there are intrinsic continuities, reaching from the nineteenth-century philosophy of nature to contemporary deep ecology, process philosophy, and shamanic discourse in Europe and North America. Often, these continuities are made explicit, for instance, when contemporary authors “rediscover” the philosophy of Schelling and others, when authors such as Morris Berman refer to older esoteric traditions, or when modern shamans such as Jonathan Horwitz quote Hermann Hesse, who overtly sees himself in a romantic lineage (see n. 11). Third, Euro-America forms an inseparable field of discourse—although this does not mean that an Emerson would have been possible in France or Germany—in a way of mutual dependence and reference. When contemporary environmentalists refer to Aldo Leopold and Thoreau, they implicitly react to Emerson’s appropriation of the discussions at Jena University around 1800.

Animism and the Feeling of Connectedness

In contemporary religious studies and cultural anthropology the term *animism* has a bad reputation. The *HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*, for instance, calls *animism* “an obsolete term” that “should be used with caution” (51 ff.). That is because after E. B. Tylor had coined the term some people—quite against Tylor’s intention⁸—used it pejoratively to mean a primitive state of religious evolution, which had not yet reached the higher state of a personal god. In both neopagan and neoshamanic self-descriptions, though, there is no sign of such a negative connotation. Quite the contrary, *animism* in most cases affirmatively stands for the proposition that everything is alive and animated—even stones, rivers, and other allegedly “dead objects.” Nevill Drury puts it directly: “Shamanism is really applied animism, or animism in practice” (5). And Jonathan Horwitz clarifies: “Animism for the animist is not a belief: it is the way life is experienced. All objects do contain a life essence of their own, and as such do also contain power” (1999: 220). Indeed, the relation is so strong that sometimes the two concepts seem to converge, as becomes obvious in Horwitz’s statement: “The word shamanism has become over-used and really very over-worked. A lot of the time when people say ‘shamanistic,’ they actually mean animistic—a perception of the world as it truly is, with all things alive and in connection. ‘Animism’ is the awareness of our connection to the world that is the foundation of the practice of shamanism. These two things are inseparable” (1995: 7).

The shamanic journey is designed as a means to communicate with those layers of reality that are not accessible in normal states of consciousness. Considering all things alive, the shaman tries to learn the language of different entities, and in nonordinary reality she or he is able to talk to them in order to get advice or help. It is this communicative aspect that Joan Halifax has in mind when she says, “The sacred languages used during ceremony or evoked in various states of consciousness outside culture (if we are Westerners) can move teller, singer, and listener out of the habitual patterns of perception. Indeed, speaking in the tongues of sea and stone, bird and beast, or moving beyond language itself is a form of perceptual healing” (92).

Beginning with the 1960s, there were increased discussions concerning the sacred dimensions of nature that entailed both *participation*

⁸ We must not forget that Tylor’s primary concern was to show the *simultaneous* existence of “primitive” and “civilized” components in modern culture (see Kippenberg 1997: 80–98). Note also that the term was newly applied by contemporary scholars, for example, by Robin Horton.

through man's awareness and *protection* through environmental efforts (for an excellent survey, see Taylor 2001a, 2001b). In this context, the adaptation of Buddhist philosophy—like that being studied in the Esalen Institute in California—was a driving force. At times, the various lines of tradition come together in single persons. One example would be Joan Halifax; another one would be the famous poet and activist Gary Snyder, who spoke of himself as “Buddhist-Animist.” Snyder also was involved in the radical environmentalist movement Earth First! (Devall and Sessions; Taylor 1994, 1995). Hence, the animistic attitude is by no means restricted to neoshamanic circles. Instead, it is part of a larger flow of the sacralization of nature—*Naturfrömmigkeit*—which spread from North America to Europe during the last two decades. From this perspective, shamanism can be addressed as a kind of ritualized way of experiencing nature. Snyder says that “the practice of shamanism in itself has at its very center a teaching from the non-human, not a teaching from an Indian medicine man, or a Buddhist master. The question of culture does not enter into it. It's a naked experience that some people have out there in the woods” (in Grewe-Volpp: 141).⁹ On another occasion Snyder assures us that poetry and song are among “the few modes of speech . . . that [provide] access to that other yogic or shamanistic view (in which all is one and all is many, and many are all precious)” (13–14).¹⁰ The shamanic journey can help put mystic experiences, for instance, on wilderness trips, into a ritualized form that not only conceptualizes the experience but also gives evidence and coherence to it. By means of this *framing*, those experiences are controllable and repeatable.

Using the name of a famous environmentalist ritual, each neoshamanic workshop can be considered a *council of all beings* (Seed et al.). People believe that, along with the workshop's participants, there are present their helping spirits, their teachers, the entities of the place, and spiritual beings from different cosmic dimensions. To make those relationships known and open to experience is an important goal of neoshamanic courses.

If animism is shamanism's dominant religious feature, it will come with no surprise that the connectedness of all living creatures is also predominant in modern western shamanism. Jonathan Horwitz, for instance, explicitly states that “an essential aspect of Shamanism is that we are all

⁹ Grewe-Volpp's chapter “The Poet as Shaman” (141–143) unfortunately is entirely dependent on Eliadian interpretation. Note that Snyder's proposition represents the neoshamanic conviction that an “indigenous” background is not necessary for shamanic practicing.

¹⁰ This fits Snyder's proposition that communication with nonhuman species is realized not by normal speech but through song: “They don't talk to you directly, but you hear a different song in your head” (in Taylor 1995: 113).

connected. When I say ‘we,’ I am not just including human beings, but human beings being connected to ants, to creatures at the bottom of the sea, to the stars, to dirt—to everything. This is an essential concept in shamanism, as it is in Buddhism” (in Brown: 16). Nancy Wood puts this impression into poetic language:

All is a circle within me,
 I am ten thousand winters old.
 I am as young as a newborn flower.
 I am a buffalo in its grave.
 I am a tree in bloom.
 All is a circle within me.
 I have seen the world through an eagle’s eye.
 I have seen it from a gopher’s hole.
 I have seen the world on fire
 And the sky without a moon.
 All is a circle within me.
 I have gone into the earth and out again.
 I have gone to the edge of the sky.
 Now all is at peace within me,
 Now all has a place to come home. (in Halifax: 137–138)

From this perspective, shamanism is a way—or maybe just a technique—to reach a mystical state of interconnectedness, a spiritual path to *unio mystica*. Horwitz has already pointed at Buddhism as a closely related tradition. This is emphasized by Halifax:

Originally, I understood interconnectedness in terms of the Buddhist notion of *pratityasamutpada*, or conditioned co-arising, which says that everything that occurs is conditioned by and conditions everything else. As my meditation practice continued and I spent more time in the wilderness, I began to feel that all creation shares a common skin. . . . I have for years felt strongly that it is important for us to discover directly this ground of reality, this web of mutuality. The experience of interconnectedness, however one might come to discover it, changes how we perceive the world. (138)

It is not my intention to judge whether this perception of Buddhism or even shamanic tradition is “correct” from an academic point of view. What I try to illuminate is the *longue durée* of mystical perceptions of nature and its metaphysical implications. Poetry and science in a romantic context conceptualized nature in the same manner.¹¹ What is more,

¹¹ Another work of art illuminating this continuation into the twentieth century would be Hermann Hesse’s poem “Manchmal,” written in September 1904. Interestingly enough, this poem was chosen by Jonathan Horwitz and Annette Høst as a motto for their 1998–99 workshop program.

already in nineteenth-century discourse Buddhism was blended into this matrix of alternative non-Christian religion.¹²

In all neoshamanic activities the dimension of artistic expression plays a decisive role. This becomes obvious when one looks at the courses offered at the Scandinavian Center for Shamanic Studies, such as “Shamanic Singing,” “Dancing with the Spirits,” and “Shamanism and Healing Art.” For the latter the following description is given:

Shamans have always used artistic expression to make their experiences in the spirit world visible in this reality, to make power objects to help them in their healing work, and to strengthen their ties with their Spirit-helpers. On this course participants will work creatively and practically within a shamanic framework, expressing the experiences of the journey through painting, poetry, decoration, dance, and song. Participants will learn how to let power from the spirit world take form in the material world, how to put spirit power into power objects, and how to use them in their work. (autumn and winter 1998–99 program)

Given the strong impact of animism and the feeling of connectedness, it is but one step to the notion expounded by “New Age science” that the earth is a living being. This notion was formulated by James Lovelock in his “Gaia hypothesis” and carried on by David Bohm, David Peat, Ilya Prigogine, Rupert Sheldrake, Fritjof Capra, and Ken Wilber, among others (see Hanegraaff: 62–76, 113–181). Today it is often discussed under the heading of *deep ecology*. To this I shall now turn.

Deep Ecology

The concepts of radical bioethics and deep ecology contribute significantly to modern western shamanism’s attitude toward nature. They bind spiritual practice to a comprehensive philosophical theory and offer reasoning that is in turn able to secure the spiritual field. The term *deep ecology* was introduced in 1972 by the Norwegian analytic philosopher Arne Naess to denote a concept that radically attacks the anthropocentric orientation of contemporary ethics and politics (see also Devall and Sessions). The philosophical discourses about pantheism, panpsychism, ethical naturalism, natural teleology, and the like soon left the academic field, meandering through the wide ranges of neopaganism and modern esotericism. As in the nineteenth century, biocentric views became a question of experience, poetry, and religion, rather than philosophical argument and conclusion. Dieter Birnbacher hints at the fact that “similar to the Romantic *Naturphilosophie* philosophy itself becomes part of the claimed process, the

¹² On the renaissance of orientalism in the nineteenth-century academia and public, see Halbfass and Kippenberg 1997: 44–51. From a critical perspective, see also Asad.

process of the holistic, i.e. no longer exclusively rational realization of the individual self" (9).¹³

Thus, theory and practice are but two sides of the same coin. With regard to shamanism this becomes evident when one considers Jonathan Horwitz's course bearing the title "Shamanic Healing and Spiritual Ecology" (summer 1998). It is described as follows: "Much of the course time will be spent connecting with the spirits of the stones and trees, the Moon and Sun, the wind and the rivers, and the creatures of the Earth. We will learn again from them to respect and work together with the Earth on a deep spiritual—and practical—level for our common continuation and growth."

Holism's assumption that earth and cosmos are a living web of interrelated parts finds its parallel in the research of deep ecology. Deep ecology, or spiritual ecology, tries to cope with the scientific impression that the world's ecosystems seem to be connected in a way that cannot be explained by simple causal patterns. Instead, it induces metaphysical explanations (see Goodenough as an example). The shamanic model for interpreting reality—at least according to those authors' view—can be seen as an appropriate rationalization of ecology's otherwise paradoxical results. In a recent publication entitled "Shamanic Science" Franz-Theo Gottwald (from the Schweisfurth-Stiftung in Munich) assumes: "Formerly the empirical basis consisted of information about reality that met the standard of classical scientific empirical models. In contrast to this, the comparative view on shamanism and the axioms of deep ecology tries—by drawing on the whole spectrum of human perception and consciousness—to understand reality in a holistic manner" (Gottwald and Rättsch: 23).¹⁴

Within the neoshamanic spectrum this correlation already is an integral component of common discourse, as can best be seen in Halifax's statement:

Like Buddhism and shamanism, deep ecology is centered on questioning and directly understanding our place from within the web of creation. All three of these practices—Buddhism, shamanism, and deep ecology—are based on the experience of engagement and the mystery of participation. Rooted in the practice and art of compassion, they move from speculation to revelation through the body of actual experience. (xxx)

¹³ From "Vorbemerkung" (Birnbacher). For a critical evaluation of deep ecology, see Katz, Light, and Rothenberg.

¹⁴ From "Hören, Wissen, Handeln—Schamanische und tiefenökologische Anregungen für eine konviale Wissenschaft" (Gottwald and Rättsch). The *New Science* series of the publisher Eugen Diederichs has a tradition of its own, reaching back into the first decades of the twentieth century (see Hübinger).

But one thing strikes the historically educated observer: Whereas the convergence of religious semantics and certain scientific theories (often chosen eclectically) is a well-known topos in literature of neoshamanic provenance, there is a considerable lack of acquaintance with the historical forerunners of those concepts, especially with the theories of *philosophia naturalis*. The academic study of religion, though, will lay special emphasis on this contextualization. Hence, the rest of this article is devoted to exactly that purpose. I shall discuss paradigmatic examples for the existence of currents that contest disenchantment and fight the tendency within modern western culture to desacralize nature. It will be shown that the nineteenth century must be addressed as the formative phase of neoshamanic nature discourse.

CONCEPTS OF NATURE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY THOUGHT

Making use of Antoine Faivre's research into western esotericism, Wouter J. Hanegraaff has noted that "New Age science" is related to the field of *philosophia naturalis*, rather than to the scientific: "*Naturphilosophie* is not a secular but a religious philosophy, whether or not its defenders try to present it as such" (65).¹⁵ Hanegraaff's observation that the new paradigm should be studied in terms of philosophy and religion can be taken as a reasonable point of departure for analyzing contemporary shamanism. In this regard, it is the tradition of the philosophy of nature that is of crucial importance.

I shall not attempt to scrutinize this topic in detail. Instead, I select from a huge field of thought traditions the seminal philosophy of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775–1854) and trace its impact on the romantic sacralization of nature, focusing especially on Novalis and the American transcendentalists.

Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling

About Schelling's work, Wolfdietrich Schmied-Kowarzik succinctly notes: "There is no comparable philosophy of nature until today that matches this project" (1989: 244). Indeed, Schelling's influence has been enormous. As we face current global ecological crises, his concept of a living nature not dichotomously separated from man has been newly discovered in the late twentieth century, both in Europe and in North America (see Bowie; Esposito: 186–244; Schmied-Kowarzik 1996). Two aspects that appear to be of paramount importance for contemporary

¹⁵ As to the six characteristics of the esoteric "worldview" proposed by Faivre, see Faivre: 10–15.

shamanic speculation will be described here—the conceptualization of nature as a *lively process* and the role of *empathy* for nature’s cognition.

Schelling, the colleague of Fichte, Hölderlin, and Hegel, strove from the beginning to overcome the difference between the idea of ontological substance and transcendental philosophy. What does that mean? Transcendental philosophy asks for the conditions of *cognition* of nature and, consequently, considers the perceiving subject, the active consciousness, as the uniting factor. In contrast, *Naturphilosophie* asks ontologically for the uniting factor within active nature itself, thus considering nature to be the productive power of its evolution. In his *Erster Entwurf eines Systems der Naturphilosophie* (1799) Schelling assumes: “So it is not that we know nature, but nature is a priori, i.e. every single part in it is determined in advance by the whole or just the idea of nature. But if nature is a priori, it must be possible to know it as something a priori” (3: 279).

Nature as an *active category* can only be recognized by transcending its single products—the material world—and looking behind the process of its evolution. As Schelling defines, “Nature as a mere *product* (*natura naturata*) we call nature as *object* (at this aims every empiricism). Nature as *productivity* (*natura naturans*) we call *nature as subject* (at this aims every theory)” (3: 284). The intention of *Naturphilosophie*, therefore, is to find out how nature brings forth its materially given products. The term *natura naturans*, first introduced by Aristotle and elaborated by Ibn Rushd, Albert Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, and Roger Bacon in high scholasticism, designates the aspect of a “living becoming.” It contrasts with the study of dead being. The generated, material objects are of importance only insofar as they allow conclusions about the principles of “becoming” that lie beneath them. Hence, Schelling argues against a mechanistic concept of nature that is limited to empiricism and for an organicistic model that resembles the modern philosophy of life.

Schelling goes on to explain that if nature were characterized by productivity alone, then there would be an endless evolution without plan and form. This chaotic evolution must be regulated by a driving force *within* nature itself, not from outside. He assumes that “basically, nature must become an object for itself. This transformation from a *pure subject* into a *self-object* is unthinkable without a primordial polarization in nature” (3: 288). But this is not the final result of Schelling’s argument. He describes a synthesis of that polarization on a higher level: “It is simply impossible to think of the *stability* of a product without thinking of its *continuous reproduction*. The product is to be considered as *being destroyed in every moment*, and *being reproduced in every moment*. What we see is not the product’s stability but its continuous reproduction” (3: 289).

In addition to this metaphysical and ontological approach it is important to note that, in contrast to Kant's contention that the only authority for judging nature lies in the observing subject, Schelling conceptualizes nature as an independent and self-organized entity that can be known by any human with an empathetic and open mind (see Schmied-Kowarzik 1996: 37–94). In so doing, Schelling overcomes the crucial Cartesian dichotomy of *res extensa* (extended matter) and *res cogita* (thinking).

In contrast to Fichte, who sees nature as a dead object, Schelling holds the position that the dichotomy of humans and nature has to come to an end. It sounds rather modern when he says—in his *Darlegung des wahren Verhältnisses der Naturphilosophie zu der verbesserten Fichteschen Lehre*—that his time is the time “that makes the I-ness [*Ichheit*] the principle of philosophy”; it is the time that *theoretically* reduces nature to a “mere mechanism” (7: 102 ff.) and *practically* forces nature under humankind's interests that do not shrink from nature's destruction—“because as long as nature serves man's needs, it will be killed” (7: 18).

Against the total destruction of nature *and* humankind through thoughtless monopolization of the subject, Schelling's *philosophia naturalis* holds the principle of empathy and connectedness. This opinion grew stronger in his later works after 1804. A good example is the following quotation:

Not life of nature itself, and not your own original sense is locked up; the inner death of your own mind and heart locks you out of both. The real seeing of the living, though, cannot be recognized through that stupid and arrogant passing over those things. What is needed, is a trait of inner love and familiarity of your own mind with nature's liveliness, a quiet, deep-reaching composure of the mind that transforms the mere sensual perception into a sensible one. (Schelling, 7: 62)

It is exactly this attitude toward life and nature that makes Schelling a very modern author, at least with regard to deep ecology and shamanism.

Novalis and Romantic Pantheism

The roots of modern western shamanism are to be found in the nineteenth century's philosophy of nature and pantheism, which for their part built on concepts that had been present in Europe from the time of the Renaissance. Under the influence of Schelling and the newly adopted mysticism of Baruch de Spinoza in nineteenth-century thought, German thinkers tried to maintain the Hermetic concept that nature is in itself divine. In 1822, at the founding assembly of the Association of German Scholars of Nature and Physicists (*Gesellschaft deutscher Naturforscher und Ärzte*), Carl Gustav Carus defined *Naturphilosophie* as “the Science

of God's eternal metamorphosis into the world" (see Gladigow: 220–221).¹⁶ In this perspective everything is connected, everything carries deeper meaning, everything mirrors the world's holiness. The dominant terms for this discussion are *holism*, or *monism*, and *hylozoism* (Gladigow: 219–221). Hence, Ken Wilber—one of the prominent contemporary holistic thinkers—is wrong when he too simply contrasts “modern science” and “premodern religion” (see, e.g., chap. 2). It is the mutual dependence of both that characterized nineteenth- and twentieth-century holistic discourses.

This leads me to the second important term for my argument—*pantheism*. Though this concept is already dominant with Spinoza, its career can be traced from John Toland (1670–1722); to Lessing, Mendelssohn, Schopenhauer, and Schleiermacher; and later to J. F. Fries, F. M. Müller, and Wilhelm Dilthey, who wrote two important studies on the subject. Of further importance are the American transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau,¹⁷ as well as the French thinkers Victor Hugo, Pierre-Simon Ballanche, and their circles (Bays; Juden; Riffaterre). Because this is not the place to give to those authors the attention they deserve, I pick out from the many the writings of Friedrich von Hardenberg (1772–1801), better known as Novalis, and note parallel thoughts in North American nature writing. In Novalis, the religious charging of philosophical models of nature is striking. Furthermore, his blending of poetry, art, philosophy, and religion prefigures neoshamanic attitudes in a characteristic way.

Two issues running through Novalis's oeuvre are of crucial interest here—the *sacralization of nature*, on the one hand, and the *merging* of humans with nonhuman entities, on the other. The first can be demonstrated with the *Lehrlinge zu Saïs*. In this novel, which is deeply impregnated with esoteric-chemist motives, Novalis describes nature as a sacred organism, whose secrets can only be unveiled by poetic empathy and an all-embracing love and compassion. The author speaks of the visionary perception (*Bschauung*) of eternally flowing nature that creates in the observer “a new revelation of love's genius, a new ribbon of the You and the Me. The careful description of this inner world history is the true theory of nature. Through the internal association of his [i.e., the thinking human's] world of thoughts and its harmony with the universe, a

¹⁶ This definition was also applied by philosopher of nature Lorenz Oken.

¹⁷ On the question of Schelling's influence on them, see Esposito: 186–207; on Schelling's reception by Edwin Starbuck and G. Stanley Hall, see Fuller: 126–129.

thought system is created automatically that exactly mirrors and formulates the universe" (1: 225). Nature in its entirety is only "comprehensible as a tool and medium of agreement between sensible creatures" (Novalis, 1: 225). Shortly before, Novalis had pointed out that "it would be more imaginable that [nature] was the result of an incomprehensible agreement between infinitely different entities, the miraculous ribbon of the spiritual world, the point of merging and contact of uncounted worlds"; this is because "nature would not be nature if it did not have a spirit" (1: 222).

In this meeting, which is almost a "council of all beings," the poets deserve a special place. Only the poets should deal with "the fluid," that is, living nature: "The workshops would be temples and with a new love people would adore and praise their flames and rivers" (Novalis, 1: 229). Similar to other romantic authors and in direct prefiguration of Halifax's or Snyder's neoshamanic attitude, Novalis describes the poet as the true mystagogue of nature who is able to understand the language of the universe. He calls this the "sacred language . . . that was the glooming ribbon between those royal humans with supernatural realms and their inhabitants" (1: 230). Some of them, namely, the adepts of Saïs, are still in possession of such secret knowledge:

Their pronunciation was a wonderful singing. Its irresistible tones enter deeply into the inner side of every nature and take it apart. Each of their names seemed to be a password for the soul of every body of nature. With creative force those vibrations attract all pictures of the world's appearances, and of them one could justifiably say that the life of the universe was an eternal talk of a thousand voices, because in their talking all forces, all kinds of action seemed to be united in a most mysterious way. (Novalis, 1: 230)

One should compare this with Halifax's notion that

those who understand that Earth is a living being know this because they have translated themselves to the humble grasses and old trees. They know that Earth is a community that is constantly talking to itself, a communicating universe, and whether we know it or not, we are participating in the web of this community. . . . To connect with the medicine, or power, of lightning and star, one must sound them. . . . The singer is a specialist who through knowledge of evocative language has access to the natural world. (82)

The similarities are striking. The concept of nature as a communicating universe, in which the human is but one participant among many others, led Novalis to the assumption that the boundaries among seemingly disparate entities are blurred: "Soon for him the stars were humans, the humans stars, the stones animals, the clouds plants" (1: 202).

In Novalis's novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* those issues reappear. But now the motive of merging with nonhuman species is of even more relevance than in the *Lehrlingen*. This merging is characterized not only as an *unio mystica* but as an almost shamanic communication with other worlds. Novalis addresses this aspect already in the first chapter: "Once I heard talking of old times, how the animals and trees and rocks had talked to the people. I feel as if they want to begin right now, as if I could see by their appearance what they wanted to tell me" (1: 241). Interestingly, after this passage the protagonist is lost in a dream world and experiences an almost "shamanic" journey. Behind a meadow he discovers a rock with a large opening leading into a deep corridor. Entering it, he is led into the rock until he perceives a bright light from afar that attracts him. When he steps out, he finds himself in a new, mysterious world from which revelations break forth. In this revelatory context a "high light-blue flower" (*hohe lichtblaue Blume*, an alchemical image) is of special importance.

Of course, I do not propose this episode to be a "shamanic journey." What I am pointing to is the close relationship between the initiation, on the one hand, which Novalis describes in an esoteric, alchemical, and Masonic allegory, with the crucial place of experiencing nature and the neoshamanic conceptualization, on the other hand, that is likewise explainable against the background of esoteric tradition.

Although Novalis wrote the *Ofterdingen* with a strong reference to Goethe's *Werther*, the sacralization of nature goes considerably beyond the pantheistic elements in Goethe's early novel. Now empathy and adoration lead to complete merging:

The plants are the most immediate language of the soil. . . . When one finds such a flower in the loneliness, is it not as if everything around is transfigured, and as if all those little befeathered sounds [*befiederten Töne*] love to gather in their near? One wants to cry for joy and, isolated from the world, to put one's hands and feet into the earth in order to take root and never again leave this happy neighborhood. Over the whole dry world this green, mysterious carpet of love is stretched out. (1: 377)

It is the "remembrance of the old flowership (*Blumenschaft*)" that keeps man's knowledge of the mysterious unity of all entities alive.

Because humans once were a part of the whole living universe, it comes with no surprise that the animals and plants talk to them directly. When the "pilgrim" Heinrich meditates about those secrets, "the tree began to tremble. The rock made a hollow rumbling sound, and as if coming from a deep subterranean distance some clear little voices sprang up and sang" (Novalis, 1: 369). They sang the song of all-embracing love. Furthermore, the crucial importance of love is also found in neoshamanic discourse.

One example is Jonathan Horwitz's proposition that "the spiritual root of 'energy' is probably love. When you look at the entire universe it is filled with power, but for me this power, way out to the very edges of the universe, if there are any edges, is energy" (in Brown: 16).

The Influence of the American Transcendentalists

In North America romantic nature discourse followed its own direction. From the "Pilgrim Fathers" on, the construction of *wilderness* as a reference point of identity and the religiously charged enterprise of the "American project" influenced the attitude toward nature in a significant way (see Brunotte; Oelschlaeger) and shaped what Catherine L. Albanese calls the "American nature religion." Although this discourse took on characteristics of its own, it should not be artificially isolated from European philosophy and culture (interestingly, both Oelschlaeger and Albanese fully skip non-American traditions), especially because the nineteenth century brought forth quite similar concepts on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the beginning, the reception of European philosophers had been marginal. American transcendentalists grounded their theories much more on biblical and Christian positions than on idealistic speculation (for explanations, see Esposito: 189). This picture changed when Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Victor Cousin, John Elliot Cabot (Emerson's biographer), William Ellery Channing, and others assimilated German idealism (Schelling in particular) to the American philosophical debates (see Coates: 134–139; Esposito: 197).

For modern American (nonindigenous) shamanism, the influence of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century environmental and conservation movements is decisive (Fox; Taylor 1995). But this influence notwithstanding, to a large degree the *aestheticization* of nature among the transcendentalists and environmentalists was similar to intellectual pantheism in Europe. Hence, it is part of a larger field of discourse that brought forth modern western shamanism. To demonstrate this, let me just briefly hint at a few instances, restricting myself to the topics of communication and merging, which I dwell on above.

The issue of human trans-species communication, or, rather, the "council of all beings," is not only present in Novalis. A direct parallel can be seen in Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous essay "Nature" (1836), in which he talks of the true poet's ability to describe the hidden levels of reality: "At the call of a noble sentiment, again the woods wave, the pines murmur, the river rolls and shines, and the cattle low upon the mountains, as he saw and heard them in his infancy" (21).

To be sure, Emerson did not sacralize nature in a biocentric way. This was done by Henry David Thoreau and John Muir after him. The identifi-

cation of humans and nonhuman entities and, furthermore, the ontologization of natural objects are particularly dominant in Thoreau's works. For instance, he depicts the Walden lake as "character," "neighbor," "great bed-fellow," and so on. On one occasion the protagonist views his image in the water and asks, "Walden, is it you?" (Thoreau: 193). Lawrence Buell correctly concludes that those passages go beyond mere metaphor "toward an almost animistic evocation of Walden as a living presence" (208). From here, it is but one step to the lyrical shamanism of Gary Snyder or Joan Halifax.

Schelling's concept of merging through empathy and Novalis's notion of "flower-ship" (*Blumenschaft*) also have direct parallels in North American nature writing. Thus, John Muir talks of the Sierra Nevada: "You bathe in these spirit-beams, turning round and round, as if warming at a camp-fire. Presently you lose consciousness of your own separate existence: you blend with the landscape, and become part and parcel of nature" (416). In another context Muir addresses the "plant people" who are able to take part in his deep joy "as if they could read faces" (see Buell: 193; Oelschlaeger: 185).

As a result, there can be no doubt that contemporary western shamanism's attitude toward nature owes its characteristics to a long-standing tradition in European and American culture (for North America, see Fuller in particular). Rather than being a degenerated hybrid of indigenous cultures or an arbitrary bricolage of subjective spiritualities, modern western shamanism belongs to a movement against the mechanization and disenchantment of nature, cosmos, and the human self.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The analysis of contemporary western shamanic fields of discourse, whereby practitioners, scholars, representatives of native cultures, politicians, artists, and others negotiate their respective assumptions concerning "shamanism," often claiming a master perspective—for instance, because of academic scholarship or religious experience—is a highly complex enterprise. It necessitates a historical awareness of the formation of identities, the power of definitions, and the endurance of older concepts. In this article I have exemplified some of these issues with regard to neoshamanism's concept of nature. Other topics could have been scrutinized too. Alternative—or, rather, additional—perspectives can be seen in the concept of the soul applied by neoshamans and anthropologists alike, which is by no means "indigenous" but shows the mark of Neo-Platonism and modern ideas of "personhood," or in the concept of the "otherworld," which is a crucial term for western esoteric interpretation of reality (I scrutinize those issues in more detail in von Stuckrad).

But the focus on *philosophia naturalis* already shows the strong influence of Euro-American reasoning on contemporary shamanic identities. Hence, it is correct when critics raise the point that neoshamanism has little to do with indigenous tradition (see Taylor 1997). But, unfortunately, it is not that easy. The same is true for academic description of “indigenous tradition” (see Hutton; Taussig) and even for native self-description.¹⁸ Instead of taking an often too simple moral stand, what is needed is a reflective cultural analysis of the *interference* among all parties of the discussion. Looking at the question of nature, it becomes obvious that neoshamanism intensely mingled with the project of European and American modernity. It tries to regain a “sacramental view of reality” and to retrieve sacred dimensions of nature. In so doing it carries on a mystical and philosophical tradition that was “the other side of disenchantment.”

From another analytical perspective this issue can be described as the triangle of the philosophy of nature, art, and shamanism. In contrast to mechanistic science, which has been endemic in Europe since the sixteenth century, modern western shamanism focuses on nature’s holistic experiencing, which not only tries to bind humans back to the cosmic unity but also allows for a (re)sacralization of living nature. This religious “charging” of the philosophy of nature is then ritualized and formalized within the neoshamanic context. Artists and shamans are the virtuosos of a trans-species communication. Like ancient Orpheus, they know the language of nature; they journey into those realms of reality that are veiled to other people.¹⁹ Being captured by this powerful orphic image, neoshamans and shamanologists from earlier centuries are closely related.

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¹⁸ At this point it is important to note that in describing the Euro-American component of the shamanic discourse I do not dismiss the importance of Native Americans’ or Native Siberians’ contributions to this field of negotiation. Those are not “mere constructions” of western imagination but, rather, an integral part of the discourse. But when it comes to academic and popular *description* the (dialectic) influence of colonial history is decisive, and natives are forced to play the dominant language games.

¹⁹ The role of shamanism in the work of twentieth-century artists is an intriguing aspect of the issue but falls beyond the scope of this article. To be mentioned here are Ludwig Klages, Ted Hughes, Joseph Beuys, Frida Kahlo, Wassily Kandinsky, and others. See Kuperschmidt-Neugeborn; Müller; Weiss.

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