

Abstract

This work studies the environment of contemporary alternative spirituality in the Czech Republic, specifically unusual spiritual experiences and techniques for inducing them. It is based on long-term field research utilizing the method of participant observation carried out primarily in the environment of neo-shamanism, but also the use of psychedelics, dark therapy, and other movements and practices. I perceive and analyze these practices both as psychotechnologies – i.e. techniques through which their users strive to alter their thinking – as well as spiritual techniques aimed at establishing and cultivating a relationship with the spiritual world. The focus of this study is a comparison of neo-shamanism and other practices in three main aspects: the induction of experiences, the connection between spiritual experiences and the actor's life as a whole, and the changes in the perception of reality brought about by long-term practicing. I point out that in all these areas, techniques traditionally thought of as closely related exhibit fundamental differences.

A non-negligible part of this study consists of methodological and theoretical considerations. I show that the field of alternative spirituality has many specifics compared to other religious environments, and that mainstream methodological agnosticism may not be the most appropriate tool to understanding it. I also deal with two opposing types of theoretical approaches to the study of religious experiences: generalizing approaches based on the idea of the existence of a universal religious experience, and approaches rejecting generalizations and seeking to analyze the socio-cultural aspects of specific practices. I argue that researching the techniques for inducing spiritual experiences could constitute a certain middle ground and a way to link these two opposing approaches.

Keywords: spirituality, New Age, ethnography, psychedelics, habitus, neo-shamanism, trance, altered states of consciousness, spirits, mind, methodological atheism