Twenty-first century cultural and religious diversification of modernity: the example of the shamanic indigenisation of Roman Catholicism among Native American peoples in the Northwest of the United States

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1 Over the last three decades it has been one surprise after another for religion sociologists supporting the classical thesis of modernity ushering in secularization. For the last two centuries, scientism and evolutionism had discarded religion with the Voltaire/Frazer historical typology: first witchcraft, shortly followed by religion, finally outmatched by science. The spread of scientific and technical rationalism, the affirmation of individual autonomy and the increasingly specialized human activity was supposed to lead to the modern world's loss of religious belief. The decline in religious practice was an additional indicator of a retreat in religious belief. In parallel, ideologies – political religions? – had recently declined in favour of social democracies. Moreover, in spite of the failure of philosophical atheism – the non-existence of God has yet to be proven – practical atheism had been widely spreading among the global youth. However, religions have not disappeared, they have changed, and some of them are more and more visible, especially in politics.

2 Native Americans also experience uncertainty and they tend to fight against the negative effects of individualisation with the disappearance of traditional solidarities, the atomisation of communities and a lesser sense of responsibility toward others. In native cultural environments, today more than ever, anthropologists can identify shamanic
trends. This paper will focus on the particular example of indigenous shamanism in the Northwest of the United States. These traditional cultures are very discreet, but they now seem to be all the livelier. Unexpectedly and paradoxically, indigenous and indigenised exogenous elements are associated in producing spiritual and cultural invention and persistence of tradition through change and innovation. This system has now been at work for several centuries. From a background of both innovation and tradition, various types of shamanism currently reveal evidence of absorption and indigenisation of modernity, including popular neo-shamanic initiatives. Tension seems to be diluted in a modernity, which now sounds like an agent of an identity continuum.

Persistence of traditional shamanism

3 From the beginning there were misunderstandings. We know more about the European ones. The newcomers applied their usual Manichean vision to their new cultural and spiritual environments. They depicted « religious beings without a religion »1. In the 19th century in the Rocky Mountains, like in the other newly discovered worlds, the Jesuits and the other missionary orders burnt the shamans’ artefacts in triumphant auto-da-fés. Confident in their technical and spiritual superiority, they thought that they were – with more or less ease – eradicating indigenous spiritualities dating back to Siberian immigration2. They did not imagine for a single moment the complex cultural environment they were embedded in, which was neither absent – gone – nor hostile, and which was, in fact, scrutinizing them and waiting for their possible absorption. In the 1980s, in the wake of Council Vatican II, with the legalisation and the return of indigenous rituals, the Jesuits, who were surrounded with only 25 to 30% of so-called Roman Catholic Native Americans, realised that they were facing a new and unexpected situation. Worshippers being fewer and fewer, the priests had to accept local practices within the Roman Catholic rituals. These more or less balanced fusions of local and imported spiritualities they dubbed « syncretism ».

4 Nevertheless, several contemporary missionaries are unexpectedly in the midst of comprehending that this painful confession of the syncretic effects of their apostolate led them only half of the way. What is currently coming to light is that indigenous peoples had not rejected their previous values and shamanic spiritualities. If spiritual leaders – especially shamans – have easily surrendered to powerful Christianity since the 16th century, in just the same way, they have surrendered to the powerful European iron tools. Current anthropological hypotheses acknowledge that they were eager to receive baptism or a vaccine in order to survive the viruses of modernity and to absorb and adopt the benefit of modernity. Imported spiritualities have neither eradicated nor weakened shamanic practices, they have fuelled them with new tools, and they have regenerated and optimised them.

5 This has to be linked to the wider revival of indigenous lifestyles, a regeneration accompanied by continuity: logic of reinvention of tradition. On a larger scale, this is relevant not only to the shaman him/herself, but to the whole cultural, social and economic shamanic environment; which is a cluster of rituals, a global vision of the world. We have to figure it out: Northern American religions are difficult to grasp for Europeans used to exclusivist Christianity. Many diverse religions are to be encountered: religions of hunters, of farmers, of gatherers, and two major obstacles stand in the way:
1. The words « religion » and « spirituality » distinguish the religious realm from other elements of culture. In indigenous America, there is no partition: « the religious realm remains coextensive to the other institutions » demonstrated Quebec anthropologist Frédéric Laugrand. No dogma, no founding father(s), no sacred texts and an amazing flexibility. Humans and animals share the same social and cultural background; not an animal background, but a human one. Hence, there is no differentiation between humans and animals. In both groups, humans and non-humans can be found. The famous Northwest transformation masks reveal the spontaneous passage from the state of human to the state of animal in the same world.

2. Current anthropology of indigenous America does not refer to any first-hand sources. The accounts written by missionaries, the military and anthropologists, in spite of their significant interest, have to be subjected to multiple levels of deciphering.

We clearly have to resort to a definition of shamanism. French ethnologist Michel Perrin asked: « is shamanism a primary religion or is it a specific way of processing misfortune? ». If shamanism is regarded as a religion, it has to be naturally associated with cosmologies, creation myths, an « other-world and its pantheon ». But the shamanic pantheon happens to undergo permanent changes when in contact with other spiritual representations. It is then a different pattern from a religious one and the « misfortune processing » theory has to be privileged. On absorbing various systems in contact, shamanism does not seem to be called into question at all. Religion however, would be.

The very objective of shamanism is to give some meaning to the events and to act upon them; as demonstrated by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss:

The indigenous peoples of the Americas have apparently devised their myths only to cope with history and restore some systemic balance, which softens the more real shocks caused by the events.

The shaman is not a priest. He/she is not a spiritual employee stuck in some routine operations or without any « direct and personal » contact with the spirits. The shaman’s role is then to bridge « reciprocal and immediate » gaps with the « other-world » upon the community’s request. He/she is a privileged go-between, a therapist, a ventriloquist, and a gymnast who can have an influence on the climate. Either male or female, the shaman is « a frontiersperson » between sexes, identities and symbolical spaces. In Eliade’s view, the shaman is a « psycho pump »; for Vitebsky, the shaman is a « chameleon ». Through dreaming, which is one of the shaman’s major techniques; he/she contracts alliances with spirits and welcomes predictive messages from the « other-world ». The shaman’s power is then a salutary ability to « gather possibilities in order to better process the issues he/she is confronted with ».

In the acculturation context of the intrusive arrival of Christianity in America, integration was all the more necessary that newcomers were threatening the local societies. Entropy and the impending destruction of their world were to be feared by the shamans. Restoring the original harmonious order through negotiating with the « other-world », the world of spirits, was then absolutely necessary. Only shamans could properly achieve that difficult and dangerous task. The shamans’ efforts to adapt to change caused a multiplication of indigenous spirits and epiphanies. For indigenous peoples, it was not only a matter of adaptation; it was a way to integrate the newly interfering elements.

However, the Flathead and Dene shamans, like many others in the Northwest, were well known for their powers, and they felt particularly attracted to Christianity. In contrast to
what missionaries first thought and wrote, the shamans and their peoples were not surrendering without strategy to Christianity. Native Americans regarded the first missionaries as a new, extremely powerful type of shaman, equipped with iron tools and vaccines. The Northwest indigenous peoples were genuinely and faithfully adopting Christianity, not in order to use it instead of their own indigenous spiritual, cultural and social patterns, but within them. Their aim was most certainly, as Laugrand explained, to «tame uncertainty and fate». 

Hostile indigenous prophets are well known: Pontiac was trained by Neolin; Tecumseh was strongly influenced by his brother Tenskwatawa. Coexistence prophets were also to be found: Handsome Lake advocated the social and technological adaptation of the Iroquois15. In the Pacific Northwest in the early 19th century Coeur d’Alene shaman Yurareechen (Circle Raven) prophesized the arrival of men «wearing long black robes»16. Later, Sitting Bull wore Jesuit Fr. De Smet’s crucifix until the end of his life, and the mythical warrior and wise elder Black Elk was a deacon for the Pine Ridge Jesuits from 1904 until his death in 1951. 

Today, more than 70% of North American Indians have left the reservations, but most of them make strong claim to their indigenous identities, no doubt an effect of globalisation and individualisation. Indigenous peoples now have to preserve both their need for differentiation and a necessary integration into the global society. They also have to preserve their community links, their codes of meaning, which individuals inherit through generations. Indigenous peoples have now freed themselves from almost 200 years of official subjection to Catholicism. But generations of church going cannot be erased overnight. However, they can openly make choices: either back to traditional shamanism or remaining in Catholicism (Euro-American exclusivist vision), or both. Whatever their choices, they demonstrate an unexpected persistence of the Axis Mundi pattern, a stable religious and social life organised around the church, both Christian and/or traditional, a central position in the territory regulating both space and time, in opposition to the contemporary widely nomadic «pilgrim» spiritual tendencies17. 

This effect belongs with a wider cultural structure with the principle that US anthropologist Marshall Sahlins calls «the indigenisation of modernity»18. Whereas modern technological commodities have been globally adopted, numerous communities now using cell phones and the Internet have fruitfully adapted them without, however, deeply changing their original cultures and purposes. Peoples have survived invasion by harnessing imported technologies to their original purposes. That spiritual and technical absorption of Catholicism by Native peoples in the United States represents the simultaneous development of global integration and local differentiation. From the religious point of view, we can see a growing shamanisation of Roman Catholicism (use of Catholic commodities to empower the original native spirituality); from the technical point of view, we can see the adoption of Western technologies within the framework of custom production and distribution relationships (not only I-pads, but also economically profitable Internet shamanism), according to local standards. 

Thus, Christianity and shamanism have mutually influenced each other. In a long, slow process Christianity eventually had to soften. Now Catholic priests and shamans work together, «the first ones in the hollow of the latter ones’ hands» as contemporary Jesuit Father Patrick J. Twohy smilingly confessed after 40 years spent among various Salish communities of the Northwest19. Local Native Americans still live in a shamanic institution called «Lifeway» – «Hutchoose dah» in Northern Coast Salish:
This Lifeway involves a complex system of teachings, laws, and ceremonies that guide a People toward a noble way of being in the world. [...] Within this lifeway there are aspects, that would from the European-American perspective, be termed ‘religious’. But Salishan Elders do not speak of having a religion. They feel that religions are what the Europeans brought from Europe. What they have is a coherent lifeway passed down for thousands of years.

In an address to his Jesuit brothers, the priest openly deplored his predecessors’ exclusive conversion strategies and he acknowledged their limited impact, advocating for inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue:

This separation of the sacred and profane has still not significantly impacted the minds of Salish Peoples. Among the Salish there is just one intense world of awareness that focuses on harmonious relationships with all living ones in the seen and unseen. Some individuals may join Christian churches and respectfully honor the cosmologies and the teachings of these churches. But these cosmologies [...] are held in a wider unified awareness that is guided by a more ancient understanding of the universe. [...] The most respected « whe-dah-ub », healing or helping ones, such as Kenny Moses, Sr., « khwa-khway-chub », of the Snoqualmie People, and Isadore Tom, « te piteus », of the Lummi People, often asked for Catholic [...] prayers before they began their own work. They saw and respected all of the help coming from the Beloved, those who have died and traveled on ».

Here is absorption: the shaman uses the power of the priest to reinforce his own position.

The Salish survived:

Following the teachings of their ancestors [they] made enormous efforts to understand and adapt to European-American understandings of the world. [...] They made brilliant adaptations to the surrounding culture so that their Peoples would survive.

Finally, the priest has learnt how to accept and to absorb. At what can be regarded as the sunset of both spiritual worlds – the Native American’s and the Christian missionary’s – both threatened by global entropy; the priest seemed to rediscover the long-forgotten truth of the gospel in the long-denied indigenous spirituality, praising the mutual recognition of both spiritualities:

Understanding and attempting to live guided by Salish teachings and ceremonies has truly shown me a most noble lifeway. [...] I have absorbed good teachings. I know that the lifeway will continue, its nobility and purpose has weathered violence and death.

Thus, the shamanic cultural environment resisted and unexpectedly survived using Christianity as a powerful tool. It is a plain, simple, discreet and fragile « traditional way of going forward » as demonstrated by US philosopher Jonathan Lear with the survival capacity of the Montana Crows. For each of the last 14 Jesuit missionaries among the indigenous peoples of the Rocky Mountains Plateau, how many traditional shamans are still active? Two in the Northwest in 2012? Very few indeed, but intensely potent nonetheless.

The complex, obscure, traditional shamanism may now be fading out in the US. Or maybe not: a powerful new generation is emerging, which is actively supported by the local indigenous populations, and several inspired heirs are now coming forth. That the Jesuits confess to being swallowed by traditional shamanism could be revealing the common fate of spiritualities that have to face together modernity and the global market, current individualisation and religious business, as well as the sly monism of various neo-shamanisms.
Neo-shamanic attractiveness

22 Because of the invasion of rationality, of the growth of a promising, but somewhat frightening individualisation, and eventually of a specialisation threatening global visions; our anxious modernity seems to have actively promoted religious pluralism among individuals eager to find a quick and direct answer to their personal questionings. Uncertainty has become the unbearable obstacle in a world without a future where people are disunited. Between what is now momentary and what was supposed to be everlasting, between what is essential and what is transient, there is ever increasing tension. Any possibility of a pre-set harmonious social order is fading away. However, unavoidable fragmentation may not necessarily be destructive. Anyone can diversify their perspectives in a fragmented continuum of moments and situations.

23 An example is the proliferation of non-Western religions in the Western world as well as New Religious Movements, since the end of the 1960s, which has shown that religious belief has never failed to thrive in the world, even if it is now partly liberated from the control of traditional mainstream organized religions. Everyone validates their new belief by being part of new networks. In the same way, New Age movements have appeared over the last 40 years. Starting from the 1960s countercultures, fuelled with Christian occultism, back-to-nature sensitivity and popular discovery of sexual freedom. Currently, Next Age sensitivity supplants the former Age by giving up the previous community ideal for the benefit of personal change through personal growth. Some personal Golden Age. Religion is not back, it has always been here. The intensity of different faiths is a response to the expectations, aspirations and frustrations engendered by the typically modern promise that individual accomplishment is available to everyone. They may be called fast-religions, short-lived inadaptable borrowings from one region of the world to another in clever combinations of commitments and non-commitments, of hasty responses to down-below disappointments, again devised in order to « process misfortune ». Religion, in this case, responds mainly to a need for personal growth. It is a moral and social supporting device, a place for listening where emotion prevails over reason or ancestral dogma. In our affluent society, salvation dealers and other neo-shamans propose – or more exactly suggest – à la carte spiritualities from esoteric and magic vision of holistic therapies to chakra identifying via energy fields and integrated healing. Actually, beyond Native American shamanic experiments, these developments may be interpreted as the revenge of an ancient natural Golden Age over urban cultures, the return of elderly wisdom in the aftermath of blind industrialisation with Pow-wows, pilgrimages and temple keepers. This phenomenon, legitimate or not, reveals the unexpected arrival of the indigenous peoples into modernity.

24 Recently in North America, like in the rest of the world, various universal synthetic and fast-training neo-shamanisms have appeared and are now offered to potential worshippers without any requirement for cultural or spiritual preparation. In contrast to institutional churches, they seem to be akin to self-healing practices, made by Westerners for Westerners. On the Internet, we can find numerous organisations welcoming individuals for healing training sessions, Wannabe Indians as some Native Americans call them ironically. These crash rituals and journeys are sometimes conducted with the help of peyote or ayahuasca. Thanks to mass marketing and spontaneous ethnography, a variety of psycho-shamans and corporate shamans reveal
their clever and fruitful understanding and their use of the current global doubt and uncertainty. Far from the humble and discreet traditional shamanic practices faithful to their original small-scale adaptability, global pan-neo-shamanisms combine traditional and spontaneous practices, various religious rituals and industrial communication tools and turn them into instant therapeutic DIY systems. Now in the early 21st century, it is the difficulty associated with defining nature, culture and their relationships, which is reflected in the mischievous eye of the numerical shamans. The ethics of their worshippers could be interpreted as a kind of hatred of civilisation.

Various indigenous communities in North and South America are now reversing the previous discrimination into positive identity tools, fostering the return of ancestral wisdom in the aftermath of blind industrialisation. Environmental tourism in Native American reservations seems to be an invitation to revive the heroism of the early beginnings of Mankind among groups of original conservationists. Indigenous peoples who legitimately combat difficult living conditions in reservations now choose this way out.

Several positive effects can be attributed to this system, mainly because the management of tourism now totally belongs to the communities:

1. Several communities are now becoming economically and culturally autonomous partly thanks to casinos and eco- and ethno-tourism, including spiritual tourism.

2. The indigenous self-perception has changed. The ethnographic staging requested by tourists is now a powerful factor of self-interpretation for each of the group members. A more political vision of cultures stems from this new mode of community memory production: it is a reassertion of identity.

**Conclusion**

Now, in spite of the deep cultural and ethical opposition between persistent traditional shamanic practices and fashionable new-born ones, both systems demonstrate the splendid adaptive and pragmatic ability of indigenous peoples in America and throughout the rest of the world. Simultaneous traditional and neo-shamanisms demonstrate that beyond pain and humiliation indigenous peoples have powerfully survived Christianity and boarding schools, wars, reservations and viruses, thanks to adaptation. In the 21st century, a growing majority of Native Americans inside and outside reservations favour clever survival strategies, cultural persistence over frontal opposition; going from indigenous resistance to modernity to an indigenous adaptation of modernity, enhancing their perception of themselves and of the important part they can play in the contemporary world. For centuries, reservation Native Americans were deprived of their past; today they can sell at the highest price the image of a particular persistence, which is not only economic and social, but also deeply related to their identity, their spiritualities and – unexpectedly enough – to our anxious global world. Finally, against all odds, this phenomenon can be regarded as some sort of recognition and a victory.
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NOTES


21. Ibid., pp. 2 & 3.

22. Ibid., pp. 2, 6 & 8.

23. Ibid., pp. 2 & 6.


26. « In 2007 out of nearly 6.5 billion people on Earth, only about 1 billion say they do not believe in a god or do not believe in a specific religion. The rest of the world’s population, some 5.4 billion people, belongs to one of more than 20 different major religions. The world’s major religions range in size from Christianity, with 2 billion members, to Rastafarianism and Scientology, with about 1.5 million members each », in O’Neal, Michael J. & Jones, J. Sydney, *World Religions: Almanac*, Thomson Gale, Thomson Corporation, Farmington Hills, 2007, p. vii.

27. In Siberia, original region of shamanism, as well as in Mongolia, Lapland, Korea, China, the Amazonian forest, Peru, Africa, etc.

28. Global and Native American neo-shamanism on the web

http://www.walkswiththunder.com/

http://www.vimeo.com/5282173

http://www.shamana.co.uk/

29. Cf. world-famous 1970s works by Carlos Castaneda.

éléments de la modernité n’est pas à considérer comme une survivance pittoresque mais plutôt comme un outil d’avenir.

Modernity and the growing global anxiety it has generated have fostered numbers of ancient and new worships liberated from the control of both rationality and the mainstream religions. An example is the growing shamanic indigenization of missionary Roman Catholicism by Native American communities in the Northwest of the United States. Indigenous and indigenised exogenous urban elements are locally associated in producing spiritual and cultural invention and persistence of tradition through change and innovation. The symbolic efficiency of shamanism integrating more than ever the different elements in modernity, should not be seen as a relic of the past, but as a powerful healing tool for the future.

La modernidad y la ansiedad creciente que ésta genera, parecen haber animado y a veces provocado una atomización de los fenómenos religiosos lejos del control de la racionalidad y de las grandes religiones clásicas. Un ejemplo nos es dado por la « indigenización » chamánica de las prácticas misioneras de la Iglesia católica entre los Amerindios del Noroeste de los Estados Unidos. Elementos indígenas locales y elementos urbanos « indigenizados » son asociados con este hecho en la creación de aspectos culturales y espirituales que permiten que perdure la tradición a través del cambio y la innovación permanente. La eficacia simbólica del chamanismo, que integra más que nunca los elementos diversos de la modernidad, no tiene que considerarse como una supervivencia pintoresca del pasado sino más bien como un instrumento de sanación para el futuro.

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AUTEUR

FRÉDÉRIC DOREL
Ecole Centrale de Nantes, France, Frederic.dorel@ec-nantes.fr