

# THE DECADENCE OF SHAMANS

## or shamanism as a key to the secrets of communism

By Alan COHEN\*

### PREFACE

This text was originally written for an academic conference held in Helsinki in May 1990: the International Association for the History of Religion regional conference on northern and circumpolar religions. But it is not written exclusively for an academic audience. On the contrary. Those who were most interested in the text at the conference were precisely those who, for one reason or another, find themselves on the margins of mainstream university thinking. This was no surprise. The text is written essentially for those who, in the manner of the shamans themselves, 'walk between worlds' — for those who question the assumption that the present social order has completed the mapping of reality; those who may have had fleeting glimpses of other realities, but who are dissatisfied with or downright hostile to the woolly speculations of New Age philosophies; those who have understood that the revolution of tomorrow will create a new poetry; those who seek a convergence of hidden truths. I can only hope that this essay will provide such explorers with a starting point, a framework for discussion. And I hope that they will not leave me out of their debates.

Alan Cohen, May 1991.

### THE SECRETS OF COMMUNISM

And what is this 'communism'? Communism, Marx wrote, was the solution to the riddle of history; but we live in an epoch when the true meaning of communism has itself become a riddle, a secret. And yet today, despite all the efforts of the exploiting class, despite all the difficulties encountered by the exploited class in becoming aware of its position in society, these secrets are slowly being uncovered.

For decades, we have been informed that communism existed in the regimes of the east, in Russia, China, Albania and the rest; that communism means an omnipresent state apparatus, ferocious levels of exploitation, repression of the slightest breath of dissent. Or else, more sophisticated voices, those of the 'left', came up with a more subtle version of the same lie: these regimes are not yet communist of course; they are 'socialist' countries or 'workers' states' with bureaucratic deformations, engaged in a 'transition' towards genuine communism.

This lie, in its various forms, has been the greatest enemy of marxism, of communism and the socialist revolution this century. It has helped to bury the revolutionary traditions of the working class under an immense dung-heap of mystifications, it has turned millions and millions of proletarians away from the very idea of challenging capitalism and of changing society. If that's communism, let's stick with capitalism': no

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\* International Association for the History of Religion, regional conference on northern and circumpolar religions.

wonder the bourgeoisie all over the world has insisted so relentlessly, so unerringly that the Stalinist regimes really are communist. And today, as these regimes slide into bankruptcy and chaos under the pressure of the world economic crisis, as the Russian imperialist bloc falls to pieces before our eyes, the old lie is given a new gloss by all the propaganda which shrieks at us that 'communism has failed', that 'democratic capitalism' is the only possible form of social organisation now and forever, amen.

But we are no longer living in the dark depths of the counter-revolution which descended on the proletariat like a punishment for having dared to disturb the capitalist order in the revolutionary years after 1917. In the last two decades, the workers' struggle, once dismissed as an anachronism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has once again raised its uncouth head in every country in the world, in the west as well as the east. And with it there has emerged a new generation of revolutionaries who are rediscovering the real meaning of the communist programme, the authentic lessons of working class history. And in this process of rediscovery, the 'secret' of the so-called 'communism' of the eastern countries is being revealed more and more openly: these regimes are (though increasingly they must be referred to in the past tense) capitalist regimes where the basic division in society is still between a class of wage slaves and a small and privileged minority who command their labour power in the interests of accumulating capital. The Stalinist bourgeoisie, which is no less a bourgeoisie for having become fused with the state apparatus, was a product of the failure of the international revolution in the years 1917-23; isolated and alone, the Russia of the workers' soviets and of internationalist Bolshevism could only succumb to an agonising process of internal degeneration and counter-revolution. Against all the distortions peddled by right and left, there is no continuity whatever between the October revolution of 1917 and the monstrous labour-camp regimes of Stalinism.

And as the true nature of the 'communist' regimes becomes less and less of a secret, so the real meaning of communism and the means to achieve it are also becoming less cloudy: communism can only be the result of a worldwide proletarian revolution which forcibly overthrows the united states of capitalism; which, on the basis of the «international power of the workers' councils, sets about rooting out the essential characteristics of the capitalist economy: wage labour, commodity production, the division of the globe into nation-states, and the separation of the town from the countryside; and which has as its target the formation of a global association of the producers, a planetary human community where production is geared entirely towards the satisfaction of human needs and desires. This moneyless, stateless, classless society is the one and only version of communism envisaged by Marx and his successors; any other story is just a lie of the counter-revolution.

But what, you may ask at this point, has this got to do with shamanism? To answer this, we have to turn to what is perhaps the best kept of all the secrets of communism: the content of human life in a communist society which is no longer marred by the struggle against the vestiges of the old order, but which has begun to flower on its own bases; in what Marx called the higher stage of communism (and even the stage beyond communism itself, which Marx briefly alludes to in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. For Marx, contrary to a widely held belief, did not stop at defining communism in purely negative terms, as the abolition of capitalism and the negation of the negation. Particularly in his early work, in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, it is possible to discover a whole treasure-trove of material concerning the positive content of communism. But even in the mature Marx of the *Grundrisse*, we

discover this same concern. For Marx it was evident that a truly human society could only be one in which man's most distinctive characteristic as a species – the capacity for conscious productive activity – had ceased to be the curse that it is in class society, and above all under capitalism. That is why Marx attempts to outline the main features of the free creative activity that will replace alienated labour in a communist society:

*This process is then both discipline, as regards the human being in the process of becoming; and as the same time, practice, experimental science, materially creative and objectifying science, as regards the human being who has become, in whose head exists the accumulated knowledge of society. For both, in so far as labour requires practical hands and free bodily movement, as in agriculture, as the same time exercise (Grundrisse, p. 712).*

But Marx does not stop here, at this fusion of practical bodily exercise and scientific/theoretical insight. From the standpoint of the ruling ideology, otherwise known as common sense, the very notion of a society freed of exploitation, war and the police is just an idle fantasy; to go further and posit a world where work has become a pleasure is, from this point of view, even more foolish. But Marx himself demonstrates the truly radical nature of his thinking by taking one more step, painting a picture of the qualitative transformation that humanity would undergo in a true society. For Marx, communism in its ultimate stage meant nothing less than an alteration of man's very mode of being in the world.

In the EPM [*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*], for example, Marx insists that communism means the «*genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man*» (p. 135). The resolution of the conflict between man and nature: no longer an unconscious unity, as with the animals, nor a dreamlike, myth – based unity, as in the archaic societies, but a conscious unity: «*Thus society is the unity of being of man with nature – the true resurrection of nature – the naturalism of man and the humanism of nature both brought to fulfilment*» (p. 137). These lines have a particularly acute significance in a world that has been so horribly poisoned by the blind machinery of capitalist accumulation, but this «resurrection of nature» means more than just cleaning up the mess bequeathed by capital: it implies a new mode of being in the world, a practical and sensuous realisation that nature is man's body. But this realisation, this new mode of being – isn't it something we have glimpsed already, in sudden flashes of Satori, like the one described by the Zen master Sokei-an Sasaki:

*«One day I wiped out all the notions from my mind. I discarded all the words with which I thought and stayed in quietude. I felt a little queer – as if I were being carried into something, or as if I were touching some power unknown to me... and Ztt! I entered. I lost the boundary of my physical body. I had my skin, of course, but I felt I was standing in the centre of the cosmos. I spoke, but my words had lost their meaning. I saw people coming towards me, but all were the same man. All were myself! I had never known this world. I had believed that I was created, but now I must change my opinion: I was never created; I was the *cosmos*; no individual Mr. Sasaki existed. (The Transcendental World', *Zen Notes*, Vol. 1, no. 5, New York, 1954, cited in Waits, *The Way of Zen*, London, 1970, p. 141)*

"I was the cosmos", "All were myself": is this old Japanese succumbing to incurable megalomania, or could he be enjoying a privileged glimpse of what Marx meant by the resolution of the conflict between man and nature, and between man and man? Not the merging of selves into a dark unconsciousness, not some loathsome process of depersonalisation, but the realisation of a higher unity, the real solidarity of mankind, a vision of mankind as united in one body, which is at the same time the body of the cosmos itself?

«I wiped out all the notions from my mind». Irrationalism! The denigration of thousand reason! What has this to do with Marx? But then we come to another well-kept secret: the activity of mankind in the communist future will take him onto a plane that is beyond merely thinking about life, to one in which *man is affirmed in the objective world not only in the act of thinking, but with all his senses* (EPM, p. 140). This is what Marx called *the complete emancipation of all human senses and qualities* (ibid., p. 139), a world in which *«all objects become for (man) the objectification of himself, become his objects: that is man himself becomes the object* (ibid., p. 140). How are we to understand such phrases today? We have already suggested that this key phrase, the emancipation of the senses», can be interpreted psychoanalytically as the re-attainment, by the mature human being, of that condition of sensual enjoyment known to all of us in childhood. But it can also be understood in a more poetical or musical sense by comparing Marx's vision to the prophetic utterances of William Blake, which by a happy coincidence allow us to return to the symbolic themes that were presented at the beginning of this essay:

*The ancient tradition that the world will be consumed in fire at the end of six thousand years is true, as I have heard it from Hell. For the cherub with his flaming sword is hereby commanded to leave his guard at the tree of life; and when he does, the whole creation will be consumed and appear infinite and holy, whereas now it appear finite and corrupt.*

*This will come to pass by an improvement of sensual enjoyment.*

*But first the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul is to expunged; this I shall do by printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid.*

*If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.*

*For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.*

(‘The Marriage of Heaven and Hell’, from William Blake. *A Selection of Poems and letters*, London, 1970, p. 101).

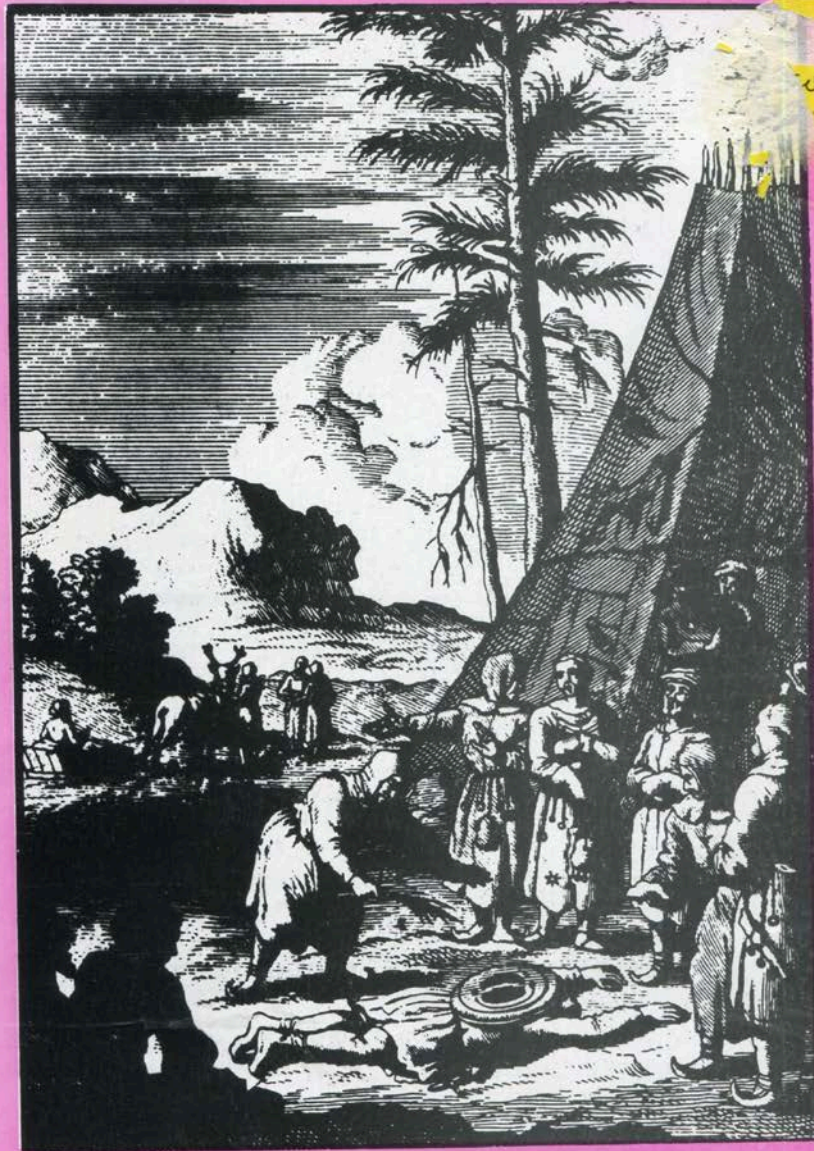
We do not have to melt away very much to reveal that Blake's cavern is the cavern of alienation and repression, that his «improvement of sensual enjoyment» is what Marx meant by the «emancipation of the senses», or that «expunging the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul» is no different from Marx's hope that man would be reconciled with his own true body, that is, with nature. And thus Blake, one of the last in the line of the great shamans, permits us to affirm that the goal of the future human community will be nothing less than to open the gates of paradise, and so, at last, to restore the Tree of Life to the world of the senses.

Alan Cohen, February 1990

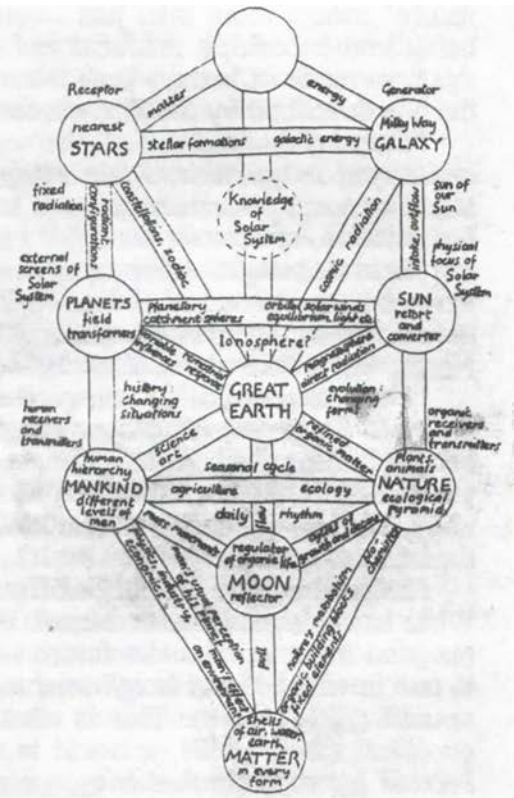
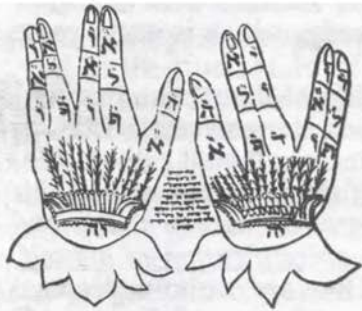
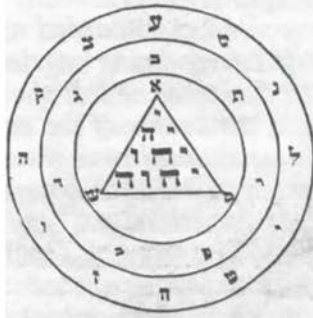
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ALAN COHEN



Present day civilization - capitalist civilization - is dying. As it collapses in blood and horror, posing a grave threat to the very future of the planet, more and more people have been looking to the tribal communities of the past to find proof that a more human society is possible. In particular there is a growing interest in the visionary healers and poets who played such a central role in these communities - the shamans.

This booklet argues that the real contribution to human culture made by the old-time shamans will be re-appropriated not through the individual solutions offered in the salons of the New Age, but in the context of the free activity of humanity in a society without money, classes or states - i.e. a communist society which has begun to flower on its own basis.

It will be evident to the reader that the communism discussed in this work has nothing to do with the monstrous Stalinist regime which was not only the gravedigger of the 1917 workers' revolution, but also showed its capitalist nature by completing the violent destruction of the tribal communities which existed in the territories of the 'Soviet Union'. In addition to the mass deportations and the genocides, shamanism itself was crime punishable by death in the 1930s. Marx, by contrast, defined communism as "*the complete restoration of man to himself as a social, i.e. a human being, a restoration which has become conscious and which takes place within the entire wealth of previous methods of development*".

The future communist society will thus restore the immense 'spiritual' wealth of the primitive societies, but on a higher and more conscious level.