Shamanism and the Origin of Evil

by Levi DeCarvalho

One Sakha (Yakut) shaman explained in 1992: "My helper spirits are not so hard to control. It is the people and their immorality that I worry about."

Åke Hulkrantz

Recent attempts at reconstructing time-honored tenets of cultural anthropology, taken in a broad sense, have generated a lively debate within the ranks of both theoreticians and practitioners of the social sciences. At the basis of this debate is an attempt at reconsidering our understanding of what constitutes true epistemology.

The irony of the debate is evident when one considers that the relativizing overtones of post-modernism (however one defines it) make it difficult to hold academic guideposts firmly in place. At stake, in this regard, is the question whether we can talk in absolute terms about relative features of human behavior.

On the evangelical front, Paul Hiebert has been perhaps the most productive participant in this debate, with groundbreaking works to his credit.[1] A problem with theoretical reflections, however, is that oftentimes scholars are fearful of their own conclusions. In other words, if our grounded theory has the potential to challenge our own practice, what do we do? The temptation is twofold—either manipulate our data or construct a new reality. In social sciences, the latter is referred to as epistemological debates.

If one brings conservative western theology to the discussion table, the paradox is even more evident. As one theologian once put it, "if you come across something new in theology, it has to be heresy."

One area of anthropological and missiological research for which we need a fresh understanding is that of shamanism. Typically, classical western anthropological research has relegated shamanism and the wider scope of religious studies to the realm of superstitions. Clearly, this approach reflects more of the researcher's bias than the mindset of the researched group or individual, not to mention culture-specific descriptions of Reality itself.[2] More often than not, it is the view of the analyst (extant in theological circles

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as well) that tends to be made universal when a particular view challenges his/her assumptions about reality.

Theoretical musings aside, my question for this article is: What is the typical view of shamanism regarding the origin of evil? The question goes beyond the scope of the usual shamanic interpretation of the phenomenon of disease, taken in a broad sense. Perhaps the word disease could be hyphenated (dis-ease) so as to emphasize that which disrupts the commonly accepted order of things, which we call reality.

In this article, I deal briefly with the common understanding about the reality of evil by shamanic societies for whom the western dichotomy between visible and invisible worlds makes little or no sense. And since there is a connection and an interdependence of these worlds in the minds of shamanic peoples, their understanding of evil can illuminate our own understanding of the Bible, and as a consequence, our perception of theoretical and applied missiology.

Shamans and Shamanism

Defining shamanism is not an easy task, given the many shades of meaning it has acquired over the years of anthropological research.[3] Its close synonym, witchcraft, and its derivatives (sorcery, Santeria, voodoo) draw considerable debate inside and outside of academia. Piers Vitebsky observes:

> Flying above the earth to the spirit world or descending into the underworld; being stripped to a skeleton, reassembled, and reborn; fighting evil spirits and sorcerers; and protecting their people from famine and disease-these are powers commonly claimed by shamans throughout the world.
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> The word shaman, sometimes erroneously used interchangeably with sorcerer or medicine man, comes from the language of the Evenk, a small group of Tungus-speaking hunters and reindeer herders in Siberia. In the strictest sense, it refers to a practitioner who can will his or her spirit to leave the body and journey to upper or lower worlds. Shamanic beliefs do not constitute a single religion or doctrinal system, although worldwide shamanic traditions approach reality and human experience in similar ways.

Hiebert, on the other hand, contrasts three basic types of worldview, which he calls "modern supernatural/natural," "Indo-European" and "Tribal." Regarding the latter, he says:

> For most tribal peoples, ancestors, earthly spirits, witchcraft, and magic are very real. The people see the earth and sky as full of beings (gods, earthly divinities, ancestors, ghosts, evil shades, humans, animals, and nature spirits) that relate, deceive, bully, and battle one another for power and personal gain. These beings are neither totally good nor totally evil. They help those who serve or placate them. They harm those who oppose their wishes or who neglect them or refuse to honor them. Humans must placate them to avoid terrible disasters.[5]

In standard shamanic thinking, spirit beings are to be found everywhere, and permeate all of reality—whether known or unknown to human beings. We could speak of both spirit beings as well as spirit forces (e.g., mana) that together make up the totality of existence.[6] A large number of shamanic peoples believe in a Supreme Being (or Force) above and beyond such powers described as ancestor spirits or evil spirits. But since there is a plethora of petty spirits with which people have to deal on a more or less regular basis, inquiring into or reflecting on the nature of this Supreme Being is of necessity relegated to a secondary plane.

Such issues as healing, demonization, misfortune, blessings and curses, infertility—all are important for the subsistence of shamanic peoples. And since there is a limit to what the average individual member of the group can do to avert or bypass such problems, the shaman is the person to whom the group resorts in order to restore reality to a manageable equilibrium.

The way a typical shaman intervenes to restore reality to its usual pattern can be manifold. Oftentimes, and depending on the severity of the situation, the shaman may resort to trance and soul flight in order to wander into the spiritual realm with a view to discovering the source of the problems and to engage the spirits (or spiritual forces) on behalf of his/her people. It is worth noticing that rare is the case when the shaman pleads or fights with the spirits regarding his/her own interests.

The Shamanic Calling and Ministry

A person is typically drawn into shamanism by the pull of ancestor spirits or shamans. Rarely does a person volunteer to become a shaman on his/her own initiative. The demands of the job are too strenuous for the average individual to be willing to devote his/her full energy to a life of constant engagement with the spirits.

A major aspect of the shamanic calling is the requirement that the candidate be separated from his/her kin in order to receive specific instructions from the spirits as to the kind of work he/she is called to perform. Coupled with the element of separation from everyday fellowship with his/her group, the candidate has to undergo a series of tests and ordeals that are designed to strengthen his/her inner character. Typically, a shaman will suffer all kinds of hallucinations and physical deprivations in order to familiarize him/her with the world of the spirits. Coupled with this otherworldly training, he/she is further instructed on healing techniques and resources, ranging from chants and dances to medicinal herbs and spiritual counseling.

In more than one sense, the new shaman acquires a new, stronger personality, which often marks him/her out as a mature and wise person, capable of handling any and all kinds of crises that trouble the people. Contrary to standard criticism, the shaman emerges from his/her ordeals with a stronger personality than before.

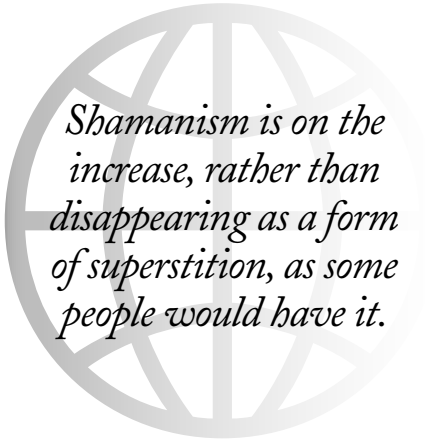
His/her return to the community is looked upon with suspicion, while the people await to see the anticipated signs of spiritual prowess and dignified conduct. A shaman's reputation takes time to be consolidated, and the people make sure that all kinds of difficult and impossible situations are brought to him/her, as tests of his/her newly acquired abilities.

A shaman is supposed to work sacrificially for the community. It is only shamans of bad repute who will exploit the people for personal gain. Sacrificial work is a major feature of any respected shaman. In fact, the shaman is available to help anyone at any time of day or night. Mediation and impartiality are expected of the shaman since he/she now is everyone's helper, not a representative of a certain segment of society.

As time progresses, a shaman typically accumulates more successes than failures in his/her dealings with the felt needs of the people. Even so, however much the shaman may have helped the people, there is always the suspicion that the spiritual power that he/she possesses may be also used to harm rather than heal and bless the community. In many situations, opinions may change from day to night, and accusations of sorcery and evildoing are as readily leveled against the shaman as are praises for evident success.

Respect and fear are daily occurrences in the life of a shaman. A sense of belonging coexists side by side with a subtle form of isolation from the larger community. In a sense, the shaman is a middle figure—he/she is, at the same time, a citizen of this world and a spiritual figure, feeling more at home in the other world than on this side of spiritual reality.

Shamanic healing is holistic. More often than not, the healer will use both spiritual and material means to accomplish the purpose of restoring health and wellbeing to the individual or the group, just as he/she will perform his healing powers in a communal setting rather than in isolation. The use of herbs, divination, confession, counseling, spiritual flights and communication with spirits, is part and parcel of the shamanic approach to healing.



A shaman may have spiritual descendents, in the sense that he/she may impart his/her shamanic knowledge to a selected individual, if the spirits so choose. As a rule, it is the spirits that single out an individual to become the new channel of communication between the people and the ancestral realm. Typically, however, a shaman is a permanent figure in the eyes of the people, and he/she must die as a shaman-even in death, his/her behavior is uncommon. In fact, many shamans have a foreknowledge of their death, both time-wise and regarding the circumstances of the event itself.

Nonetheless, death is not the end. In more senses than one, it is a long-awaited event, which will provide the shaman with the occasion to experience rebirth in the guise of a new shaman. Within two or three generations, the shaman may return to help a new apprentice in his/her calling by the spirits.

Persistence of Shamanism

Shamanism is on the increase, rather than disappearing as a form of superstition, as some people would have it. In the West, shamanism in all forms and variations has drawn the interest of a wide audience. It is a best-selling theme, with shamans and pseudo-shamans attracting large crowds of both admirers and skeptics. Many onlookers are willing to pay large sums of money to experience an out-of-this-world weekend event, replete with spiritual sessions that include communication with the spirit world, holistic healing, divination and the acquisition of amulets for spiritual protection and material prosperity.

> Even today, belief in shamans seems strongest in societies that rely on hunting and gathering. In the absence of a priestly class, individuals believe they can communicate directly with gods and spirits. Agricultural societies seem somewhat inimical to shamans because of their more institutionalized forms of religion. In our own times, shamans have been widely persecuted and their activities suppressed by secular governments and by the major established religions. Yet, because shamanic thinking is flexible and adaptable, it often persists even in complex urban societies.[6]

Shamanism and Worldview

To missiologists and missionaries alike, the persistence of shamanism should be a matter of serious investigation. For the majority of the societies of the world, in a large measure, such persistence has to do with the fact that it caters to deep felt needs of people who seek shamanic help, either out of habit or desperation. Moreover, shamanism has a (limited) internal consistency that makes it relevant to those who avail themselves of its power, even to the point of convincing more than one skeptic of its efficacy in situations where so-called scientific reasoning and advancement fail.

Both its detractors (missionaries included) as well as its followers usually evaluate the phenomenon of shamanism from the perspective of their cultural assumptions—which we call worldview. As Charles Kraft has noted[7], it is pointless to set reasoning against spiritual power (or vice-versa). Power has to be fought with power, reasoning with reasoning. It is a waste of time to condemn shamanism merely on logical grounds. In fact, it is precisely because shamanism is logical to those that resort to its power that

they continue to seek shamanic help. Besides, a better informed understanding of the biblical pattern of spiritual power reveals a surprising set of correspondences (and some contrasts) with shamanism, as discussed above. Hiebert is critical of the proponents of the third wave movement, who, in his opinion, have adopted the traditional tribal worldview.

He says,

> Spiritual warfare in animistic societies is seen as an ongoing battle between different alliances of beings. For the most part these alliances are based on ethnicity and territory. The battle is not between 'good' and 'evil,' but between 'us' and 'others.' The gods, spirits, ancestors, and people of one village or tribe are in constant battle with those of surrounding villages and tribes. When the people of one group defeat those of another, they attribute their success to the power of their gods and spirits. When they are defeated, they blame this on the weakness of their gods and spirits. Territory plays an important role in tribal views of spiritual warfare. Gods, spirits, and ancestors reside in specific places or objects and protect the people who reside on their lands. When a community is defeated, the people are expected to change their allegiance to the stronger god and serve him.
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> Conversions to new gods often follow dramatic 'power encounters.' Some Christians interpret the biblical data on spiritual warfare using the traditional tribal worldview with its emphasis on territory and power encounter. Satan is viewed as having authority over the earth which he delegates to his demonic hierarchy.
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> The belief in spirits who rule territories and control people implies that these people are hapless victims of the cosmic battles of the gods and that once they are delivered they will be ready to convert to Christ en masse. This sells human sinfulness short. Even if demons are driven out, humans call them back and renew their individual and corporate rebellion against God. Belief in evil spirits now ruling geographic territories also denies the work of the cross. Whatever delegated authority Satan had at the time of creation was taken away after the resurrection when Christ declared, 'All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth' (Matt. 28:18 NASB, passim). Satan now has no authority over the earth, only the authority given him by his demonic and human followers. Christians should not identify Satan and his followers with territories that can be exorcized. To do so is to introduce animistic beliefs into the Christian worldview. . . . [This] view of territorial spirits has little biblical justification.[8]

Though Hiebert is correct in cautioning his readers about the dangers of adopting this or that worldview, yet the Bible contains reports of spiritual encounters on the pages of the Old Testament, many of which are conveyed in animistic or animistic-like language. The Gospels' reports on Jesus' encounters with demons and demonized people follow a similar route, as do Paul's language in the New Testament epistles, not to say anything about the literary devices found in the Book of Revelation. To say that the traditional tribal worldview should not be adopted by evangelical Christians addresses (poorly) only one side of the equation. The other side, a critical analysis of the similarities and contrasts between animistic and non-animistic views as portrayed in the Bible, is yet to be thoroughly done.[9]

Shamanism and the Origin of Evil

The way a shaman typically treats a patient or sets out to solve a major community crisis—such as crop failure, plague, demonization, death, infertility—points in the direction of the shamanic understanding of the origin of evil. Since all aspects of life and reality are intertwined, all agents (human and otherwise) participate, in greater or smaller measure, in everyday events. The more serious the situation, the stronger the actors involved. Thus it is common for the death of a young person, for instance, to be attributed to the evil eye or sorcery, since the natural pattern is for the individual to lead a long life and die in due time. The same logic can be applied to all other phenomena that are thought to disrupt the equilibrium sought by the members of the community.

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In general terms, the involvement of Creator-God in the lives of humans is circumscribed to the act of creation itself, according to time-honored myths about it. For many of these groups, the people are thought to have displeased the Creator in some way, Who, then, decided to return to His abode and forget about them. As a result, the way back to Creator-God is unknown, for most, if not all, of shamanic peoples. Their dealings in the realm of the unseen are typically limited to the abode of the ancestors and evil spirits, there being a great and non-transposable abyss between the Creator and all of His creatures.

The biblical and the shamanic paradigms of dealing with the supernatural deserve a comparison, at this point. In Table 1, the words in bold type in the center column indicate biblical instances of spiritual power not originated from God.

As can be noted in the Table, there are points of parallelism and contrast between both paradigms. As for the main topic of our discussion, the origin of evil has to do with sin, natural causes, curses and spirits, as far as the biblical account is concerned. It may be added that in the Bible, evil originates not with God but with both human and demonic agents, whose freedom to act in evil ways is limited by God's own power and purposes—besides human action, through

prayer, fasting, and direct and indirect spiritual warfare.

On the other hand, as far as shamanism is concerned, natural causes of evil are of limited import—human and spiritual agencies being the main originators of evil, which have to be dealt with by means of spiritual and natural resources. Thus, the shaman is called upon to do his/her part to try and restore equilibrium to community life (understood in the broad sense of life as shared by all socially and biologically living members of the group). Since both human and spiritual agents are likely to be responsible for evil in its many forms, the process of discovering the identity of the perpetrators of evil is of paramount importance in all shamanic contexts. A holistic approach is the norm, with the shaman being the mediator of the process—sometimes at the cost of his/her own safety and bodily existence.

We must also note that, since ancestors and evil spirits are important participants in the phenomenology of evil, from a shamanic standpoint, it follows naturally that the shaman must engage himself/herself in a battle to either thwart or dispel the consequences of evil altogether. On the other hand, since human agency also is frequently involved, human responsibility must be dealt with by means of sacrifices and a change of heart, or, alternatively, mild or severe punishment is enacted, all for the benefit of the community. The concomitant use of herbs, concoctions, dietary stipulations and the like point to the notion that all available resources must be used so that extensive healing and shalom can be achieved.

Implications and Conclusion

In this paper, we have considered the origin of evil from the standpoint of a typical shamanic belief system. Points in common with the biblical paradigm have been indicated, which may lead us to conclude that both paradigms have more in common than the average western Christian may assume to be the case.

Of paramount importance to our discussion is the realization that the notion of evil may well be the overarching theme under which such issues as sin, death and disease can be properly addressed. The holistic stance proposed by shamanism can be taken as a reminder that the typical western compartmentalization of thought, verified in systematic theology, for example, creates more problems than it solves, in the long run. It is as if we tried to live whole lives while all we have received are fragmented views of a greater picture. The biblical paradigm is holistic, in this regard, which extends a bridge to shamanism, thus providing potential venues for more effective contextualization of the gospel message. Our theology and missiology should take note of that. **IJFM**

Endnotes

1. See the following by Paul Hiebert (double authorship is noted):

a. *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985.

b. "Form and meaning in the contextualization of the gospel." *The Word among us*. Dean Gilliland, ed. Pp. 101-120. Dallas, TX: Word, 1989.

c. "Checks against syncretism," *Christianity Today,* 35: 39-40 (February 11, 1991).

d. "Beyond anti-colonialism to globalism." *Missiology* 19:263-281 (July 1991).

e. *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994.

f. "Critical Issues in the Social Sciences and Their Implications for Mission Studies." *Missiology* 24: 65-82 (January 1996).

g. "Missiological education for a global era." *Missiological Education for the Twenty-First Century*. Pp.34-42. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996. (American Society of Missiology Series, 23.)

Table 1: Biblical and Shamanic Paradigms for Dealing with the Invisible World

Themes	**Biblical Paradigm**	**Shamanic Paradigm**
Blessings/curses	power of the word/Spirit/**spirits**	power of the word/spirits/amulets
Counseling	wisdom/prayer/**human wisdom**	wisdom/prayers
Communication with Creator God	prayer/words	non-existent
Communication with spirits/ancestors	non-existent/**witchcraft/spiritualism/possession**	words/flight/possession
Demonization	power of the Name/**idolatry**	power of the spirits/dedications
Divination	word of knowledge/lots/**spirits**	power of the spirits/casting lots
Evil	sin/natural causes/**curses/spirits**	human and spirit-induced/sin
Forth-telling	God-breathed/human/**demonic**	power of the spirits
Healing	God-dependent/herbs/inner healing/**demonic**	power of the spirits/herbs/counseling
Life after death	Abraham's bosom/heaven/**hell**	communion with ancestors
Spiritual protection	power of the Name/blood/prayer/blessings	blessings/spirits/amulets/blood
Trance	non-existent/ecstasy/visions/third heaven	spirit- and self-induced

h. "Conversion and Worldview Transformation." *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 14: 83-86 (April 1997).

i. *The Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts.* Valley Forge, PA: TPI, 1998.

j. "Missiological Issues in the Encounter with Emerging Hinduism." *Missiology* 28(1): 47-63 (January 2000).

2. I follow Charles H. Kraft's distinction between Reality and reality—big "R" and small "r." Reality with a capital "R" stands for the absolute reality, known only to God Himself. What humans can aspire to know in this present age is only small "r" reality—i.e., culture-specific perceptions of Reality. Lest we fall into cultural relativism, Kraft is quick to point out that what we as Christians know of Reality (our many realities) is sufficient for our understanding of God's revelation and purposes through Christ (cf. I Co 13: 12). See Kraft's *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998).

3. See Roger Walsh, "The Making of a Shaman: Calling, Training, and Culmination," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology,* 34(3): 7-30 (Summer 1994). Geoffrey Samuel, *Civilized Shamans* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1993). F. Georg Heyne, "The Social Significance of the Shaman among the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki," *Asian Folklore Studies,* 58:377-395 (1999). Luisa Elvira Belaunde, "Epidemics, Psycho-Actives and Evangelical Conversion among the Airo-Pai of Amazonian Peru," *Journal of Contemporary Religion,* 15(3): 349-359 (2000). See also my "The Shaman and the Missionary: Worldview Construction among the Terêna," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (Fuller Theological Seminary, 1999).

4. Piers Vitebsky, "What is a Shaman?," *Natural History,* 106(2): 34-35 (March 1997).

5. Paul G. Hiebert, "Spiritual Warfare and Worldviews," *Direction*, 29(2): 114-124 (Fall 2000).

6. Vitebsky, id.

7. See Charles H. Kraft, "What Kinds of Encounters do We Need in Christian Witness?," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly,* 27 (3): 258-265 (July 1991).

8. Hiebert, id.

9. The point that seems to challenge the kind of perception espoused by Hiebert and others is precisely the similarity between the biblical and non-biblical accounts regarding the world of the unseen. If we use an avowedly scientific (or theological) language, for that matter, such practice only betrays the fact that we have substituted one kind of language for another. Neither scientific nor theological (philosophical) jargons are more biblical (or represent a more "Christian worldview") than other types of linguistic codes. Meanings should come first, and forms second, in our discussion about language and its relation with shamanism.