

ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITY IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC

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Abstract: This work focuses on how members of the researched community – which practices alternative spirituality – live and think, for example in the field of health. The research was conducted in the Tatra Mountains in Liptov in central Slovakia. Qualitative data were obtained from the community, which is closely connected to this environment. The research sample consisted of 10 people (5 men and 5 women) who are part of the community.

Most informants prefer alternative forms of medicine, such as Ayurveda, and rather reject the prevailing biomedical health system associated with the pharmaceutical industry. This inclination was also manifested during the COVID-19 pandemic, when most of them refused to be vaccinated and preferred instead to build their immunity through overcoming the given disease. They rarely, if ever, visit doctors. When they get sick, in most cases, they look for a deeper, spiritual cause and meaning of their health problems. They prefer natural nutritional supplements, herbs, and other forms of prevention.

The main goal of this research was to find out how members of this community were affected by the pandemic situation, how they coped with it, and how they perceived it. I was also interested in finding out what the main source of their information was and whom they considered to be the final authority. To this end, I researched the organization of their time and daily functioning. Through the main research methods, such as in-depth interviews and participant observations, I tried to find out what led the research sample to alternative spirituality and how it is currently reflected in their lives. I assumed that alternative spirituality helps the informants to find meaning in life, as well as to understand the situations they were confronted with. I expected that these situations and experiences led them to form certain alternative life philosophies and that the research sample

regarded persons who practice alternative spirituality, or hold life philosophies that they evaluate as similar to their own, as reliable sources of information.

Keywords: *Slovakia; spirituality; religion; COVID-19; pandemic*

Introduction

For the requirements of my bachelor thesis, I conducted field research that focused on a community of people practicing alternative spirituality. These persons identify themselves as being *rather spiritual than religious*, or *spiritual but not religious*. In my work, I deal with their worldviews, philosophies¹, and ways of thinking, as well as various reasons that led them to spirituality and the search for new meaning in life. Among the most common reasons were especially challenging situations, such as serious health problems and illnesses, or divorces.

I agree with Paloutzian & Park (2005) that knowledge from different meaning-making processes and situations can be beneficial for research in the social sciences and humanities. I chose this topic because I consider the field of religion and spirituality, also within the scope of scientific research, to be very interesting. In this research, I dealt with how alternative spirituality is reflected in the lives of my informants – for example in the areas of health or sources of information, in which these persons may prefer holistic approaches. This topic was intensively discussed by the public in the times of the coronavirus pandemic, which is why I decided to investigate and analyze it more closely.

This work is divided into methodological and empirical parts. In the methodological part, I describe the research location and informants, as well as data-collection methods. The empirical part is devoted to the analysis of data obtained from the field research. Drawing on the literature cited below,

¹ Ann Taves et al. (2018) claim that alternative spirituality is inherently connected to certain worldviews, which can also be analyzed due to their connection with the meaning system. Worldviews have a cognitive character and are defined by the so-called “big questions” – 1.) ontology, 2.) epistemology, 3.) axiology, 4.) praxeology, and 5.) cosmology – that are related to meaning (Taves 2018, 2, 4). These individual categories include diverse opinions, thanks to which science also can work with them neutrally. For this reason, it is not possible to explore alternative spirituality as a separate domain, except in the context of the life philosophies of the informants (Taves et al. 2018, 1–14).

I discuss in detail the answers of informants, in which they pointed out, for example, their life stories, beliefs, and lifestyles. I also write about their attitude towards coronavirus government measures and biomedicine. Through their various answers, I state which kind of information or approaches they consider to be credible and meaningful. At the end of the work, I describe some conclusions that result from this research. This work aims to demonstrate how some persons who practice alternative spirituality coped with the coronavirus pandemic situation. Since alternative spirituality cannot be explored as a separate domain, in this research it was important to focus mainly on the context of the life philosophies of informants and work with them in the process of analysis (Taves et al. 2018, 1–14).

Methods and Participants

The research was made in the Slovak Tatra Mountains in Liptov. Because of the theme of alternative spirituality, it was important to find out which religion in this region was the most prevalent. As it turned out, religious belief in this locality is oriented towards traditional churches – mainly Catholic and Evangelical, but also various Protestant denominations. This suggests that there are not many people who practice alternative spirituality – at least not according to official and publicly accessible sources. Consequently, I will not include informants from my research sample to the majority. Equally important were the data regarding vaccination rate, which in the Liptov region – in February 2022 (and the number of vaccines 1, i.e., 1st allowance) – hovered around 52.91% (Únia miest Slovenska 2022). The above-mentioned data are important, especially concerning the understanding of the majority population of Liptov. The informants who participated in this research were not primarily located in cities, or overly frequented areas. Therefore, it is important to describe the geographical location in which they spend most of their free time.

The area surrounding the city is mainly made up of nature – meadows, and forests of the Tatra Mountains. Informants who do not live in nearby huts or wooden houses have built natural and alternative forms of dwellings in the forest, close to each other. The interiors are furnished only with what is deemed necessary. In these places, the environment is generous to tourists and other athletes. This is also the main reason why informants have decided to build their homes here – as sport is not only a hobby but also a path to

immunity and health, as well as a form of dynamic meditation and relaxation. Most informants are tourists; in the summer they're interested in rock climbing and cycling, while in the winter they ski. Equally interesting is the fact that the majority of male informants (4 out of 5) described themselves as mountain porters – regardless of whether they have done this activity in the past or are currently doing it.

Qualitative data were obtained from the community of people tightly bound to this environment. Their lifestyles, philosophies, and opinions are anchored in beliefs about the wealth and well-being hidden in nature. Apart from the fact that they are connected on a friendly level by a similar lifestyle connected with spiritual beliefs and convictions, the proximity of their dwellings is also what forms them as a community (the so-called “territorial basis of the community”) (cited in Howarth 2001, 6). All members who consider themselves a part of this community gather at common events and spend their free time together, sometimes even in smaller groups (Gottdiener & Budd 2005). At the same time, it is the connection of a few neighbours, friends, and families that forms this community (Bell & Newby 1971). Last but not least, the rural, natural environment undoubtedly has a beneficial effect on building their community life (Howarth 2001, 6). These people are from different backgrounds. Some live and spend time in this environment year-round, while others come only seasonally or recreationally.

The research sample consisted of 10 people (5 men and 5 women) who are a part of this community. Their ages ranged from 16 to 61 years. When choosing informants, I had to ensure that they were permanent members of the community – that their time spent in this community was longer than 5 years. In the end, my interviews were made primarily with founding or primary members and their children. I conducted interviews not only with high school and university students, but also with various workers from the field of education or other social and generally beneficial services. The selection of informants rested on an initial meeting with one of the community members, who then encouraged and initiated my acquaintance with his other friends (the snowball method) (Spradley 1980). After several initial and spontaneous conversations about spirituality and attitudes towards the pandemic situation, I realized that I had found the right people for this research. The time I spent with them was connected with participant observation and formal or informal conversations. Their lifestyle was arguably different from most people who live in cities, for instance.

The attitudes of the research community towards biomedicine (i.e., “the dominant biomedical model of health care” connected with legislation) are not of outright rejection, but rather a preference for alternative approaches (Bužeková 2019, 413; Jerotijević and Hagovská 2020, 48). A positive relationship between them prevails, e.g., to Ayurvedic medicine, or to building natural immunity without using the available chemical pharmaceuticals – or within the framework of the pandemic and vaccinations. Furthermore, most of the information they deem credible does not come from the media or social media, as they do not have or use them; instead, important information is typically discussed within their community with each other. The same is true for their philosophies and expressions of spirituality. It would be hard to assign any member of the researched community to a certain religious direction or traditional church. According to their statements, they perceive traditionally religious places like churches more as “*peaceful places with good energy*” (Oto), but mostly they do not feel the need to enter them. They do not even tend to need the traditional church services (e.g., Mass) that take place in them. Despite this, they declare that they have spiritual needs, such as meditations and prayers. According to the informants, their temples are located in mountains, meadows, and forests, in which they can connect to God in their hearts (through so-called “connections”) or to another form of higher power or energy, and find the sacred, which “lies at the core of” spirituality (Paloutzian and Park 2005, 25–26, 36; Bloch 1998, 67). They call these places “*natural temples*” (e.g., Veronika).

In the various debates within their community, as well as in in-depth interviews, the informants expressed their agreement with various religious and spiritual figures or prophets, such as Osho, Buddha, and Jesus. They find in their statements a certain reflection or pieces of “the truth”, which they often discuss among themselves, but generally, they do not belong to any particular religion (Paloutzian and Park 2005, 29). They consider themselves *rather spiritual than religious* persons, having adopted many spiritual currents, opinions, and philosophies that they believe in and with which they can relate in their lives (Bloch 1998, 59). Within the framework of values, the informants mostly emphasized the need for freedom and altruism, or “living in the present moment” (Jerotijević and Hagovská 2020, 44; Paloutzian and Park 2005, 300; Woodhead et al. 2002, 429). However, I will discuss this in more detail when analyzing data from the field.

Following the informants' descriptions, I will present them in more detail, using pseudonyms that I have assigned to them, as the framework of research ethics obliges me to maintain their complete anonymity:

- Informant no. 1: Patrícia – female, 16 years old – high school student
- Informant no. 2: Zuzana – female, 20 y.o. – university student
- Informant no. 3: Tomáš – male, 42 y.o. – building labour force
- Informant no. 4: Móric – male, 61 y.o. – receptionist
- Informant no. 5: Andrej – male, 40 y.o. – worker at a mountain hut and mountain porter
- Informant no. 6: Veronika – female, 48 y.o. – primary school teacher
- Informant no. 7: Belo – male, 43 y.o. – building labour force
- Informant no. 8: Oto – male, 42 y.o. – building labour force and mountain porter
- Informant no. 9: Ema – female, 26 y.o. – receptionist, currently on maternity leave
- Informant no. 10: Zita – female, 43 y.o. – (mainly) university teacher

The methods that I used in my research were mainly participant observations and in-depth, semi-structured interviews. I formulated a list of 29 main questions, some of which were developed in several sub-questions. General questions focused mainly on their origin, family background, and lives – about the events that shaped their decisions and brought them to the present location and in this community. I was also interested in their key life stages, which have a significant explanatory value in this research (e.g., whether or not the environment in which they grew up was religious). I didn't ask them direct questions but implicitly incorporated their meaning into simple questions. Larger parts of the questions were mainly focused on their values, health, faith, sources of information, or attitude towards the pandemic. As a researcher, I strove to create a safe space for informants and I conducted 10 different interviews.

Following the research, I analyzed all of their statements in the empirical part of the work, using coding, in the context of the topic and the literature cited below. When analyzing data, I was particularly interested in their alternative explanations and opinions. The main goal of the observations was to compare the interviews with real experiences and see if some ideals of informants are present in the everyday reality of their lives. Thanks to the natural environment, where they had built alternative dwellings, I could also observe their everyday

community life during the pandemic situation as credibly as possible. I documented, for example, activities such as painting, cooking, and dining together as a community, as well as collecting and cutting wood for heating their homes and cooking. They spend their time mostly in nearby forest shelters or by fireplaces, where they talk about everyday topics, but also about different philosophies in which they believe (e.g., the importance of meditation).

As part of my research ethics, before every interview or participant observation, I asked all members of the researched community if they agreed with the research and all related methods. If they did not understand any part of the described process, I explained it to them, and I also tried to answer all of their questions about it. At the same time, I assured all informants that the research was anonymous. I also introduced them to the context of anthropological research, which is not about moralizing, judging, or evaluating – but on the contrary is an effort to scientifically understand the investigated phenomenon, in which right or wrong answers do not exist. If the informants mentioned some sensitive or overly personal information in the conversation (e.g., names, titles, etc.) I deleted it in the transcript of our interviews, not using it in either my bachelor thesis or anywhere else. Before my interview with the minor, I requested a signature from her legal representative through the “informed consent” form, by which she agreed to this interview. I am also, in accordance with research ethics – and due to the lifestyle and environment of all informants, compelled to maintain their complete anonymity (e.g., names, specific residences, titles, etc.).

Operationalization of concepts

Alternative spirituality – The concept of spirituality is closely linked to the transcendent dimension and the search for the sacred and meaning, which can be reflected in identifiable values associated, for example, with altruism. It is mostly associated with faith in a supernatural being, such as God, or another form of energy or higher power. Spiritual persons often tend toward holistic worldviews and philosophies, which include physical, mental, and spiritual aspects, and may manifest in their lifestyle. As it is possible to examine *alternative spirituality*² only within the context of the life philosophies of the

² A growing phenomenon described by Paloutzian and Park (2005) are those who prefer to call themselves “spiritual” rather than “religious” persons. These are usually people who feel the need

informants, my research mainly measured it by the attitudes of the research sample towards the areas of health and the coronavirus pandemic, in which these persons may prefer holistic and natural approaches.

Meaning – In this work, I define *meaning* as the main motivating force that drives a person in life and that is closely linked to spirituality. I describe it as a part of a meaning system that consists of an individual's beliefs, goals, and subjective sense of meaningfulness. In this research, it specifically means that I asked informants about various challenging life situations that they were confronted with and that could have an impact on their meaning system, or the creation of new meaning, which is more associated with spirituality.

Pandemic – In this research we discuss the coronavirus pandemic in terms of the social and political sphere connected with government measures and strong recommendations for vaccination against this disease. From the government measures, it is important to mention the so-called “ROR”, which in Slovak stands for “*ruky, odstup, rúška*” (“hands, distance, respirators/masks”) and in reality was connected with disinfecting one's hands, keeping distances between persons, and covering the upper respiratory tract with a mask or respirator. Because of the rapid spread of the disease, the government of the Slovak Republic also introduced other measures, such as nationwide lockdowns, prohibiting or limiting transfers between cities, other kinds of movement, and public events. Some of these measures were also reflected in the relocation of school and work attendance to the online sphere. Specifically in this research, I therefore focused on the attitudes of the informants towards the coronavirus pandemic, namely towards government measures and recommended vaccination. I expected that their views and explanations may be unconventional, for example, symbolic and metaphorical.

to explain or interpret their more difficult, stressful, or traumatic life events. It can be an accident, an illness, the loss of a loved one, or various other circumstances that created a certain pressure on their meaning system and caused the already mentioned need to give them a deeper meaning, also on the spiritual level (299–335). According to various research, they perceive these events as personal challenges and do not need to define or limit them by different dogmas or moral principles. Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005) also write about them in the context of the “spiritual revolution” of recent years, in which “change or various conversions are manifested in their increasing number. They are mostly persons who consider themselves believers but do not strictly believe in God and [mostly] are not members of traditional churches” (cited in Jerotijević and HagoVská 2020, 44–46).

Sources of information – The most common or traditional media, such as television, radio, newspapers, and magazines, are the primary sources from which people receive information. In addition, the Internet and social media, such as Facebook and Instagram, are extended sources of information. I argue that these sources can have a significant impact on the formation of beliefs and attitudes of those who follow them, even during the coronavirus pandemic. In the field, I analyzed the sources of information that informants consider trustworthy, or whom they trust and consider to be reliable and authoritative.

Life journeys towards alternative spirituality

Paloutzian and Park (2005) stated that pressure – in the form of negative or traumatic life events – for which there is a discrepancy between the perceived reality and belief system, can lead to spiritual transformations (334). The greater the pressure (created on a *meaning system* of the individual) and imbalance that is felt in their life, the bigger and more visible the change will be. Similar experiences were described by my informants, who felt, for example, a loss of safety or meaning in their lives. In these cases, when the global meaning is disturbed and transformed, it can be more compatible with the current life. What is changed is the *meaning system* and its components³, which Paloutzian and Park (2005, 297) describe in more detail in the *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, in the *Model of life meaning*⁴.

Most of the informants explicitly highlighted the abovementioned challenging situations and events that led them to change their opinions and lifestyles. This change in attitude also included reinterpretations of various life events, which they adapted into new, alternative spiritual explanations. Jerotijević and Hagovska (2020, 54–55) write about this kind of explanation in greater detail.

³ Components of a meaning system include attitudes and beliefs, values, goals, overall meaning, self-image, and core interests (Paloutzian and Park 2005, 334). “The meaning system is a psychological construct of a dynamic set of mental processes whose operation cannot be understood as independent from some element of faith. The components of a meaning system dynamically interact with each other to affect an individual’s whole character within the context of that faith” (Paloutzian and Park 2005, 335). When the beliefs and goals of individuals during their spiritual transformation are disrupted by the pressure of various stressors, they are consequently transformed and renewed by the new *meaning-making process*.

⁴ The main part of this model is so-called *global meaning*, which consists of *beliefs, goals, and subjective sense of meaningfulness* that are directed at major life goals. “When something traumatic happens, global beliefs and goals are disrupted. This experience can be felt as a loss of meaning. The *process* of the change of global meaning is called *meaning-making*” (Paloutzian and Park 2005, 297–298).

Therefore, I argue that these events had a significant impact on the formation of their new *meaning system*. I was primarily interested in the causes that guided informants to practice alternative spirituality. In most cases, I encountered references to specific life events experienced by members of the researched community. These led them to change their environment and to more deeply reflect on questions to which they were able to find answers in the researched community – in various shared opinions and philosophies which fall within alternative spirituality. The most common situations described by the informants were serious illnesses, or separations and divorces (their own or of their parents) – unless they were brought to this new place by their family, by other contacts, or due to other reasons. So the question is: Why has alternative spirituality been able to provide them with so many answers?

As Clifford Geertz (1966) explains, religion and spirituality can provide people answers to questions that may arise in various existential issues, which appear to be beyond common understanding (e.g., suffering and death), as they point to a broader, transcendent pattern of order and meaning (cited in Paloutzian and Park 2005, 299). “Religion is [usually] associated with faith, doctrines, dogmas, ... or social control”, and spirituality rather with certain “feelings or experiences of closeness with God or feelings of interconnect-edness with the world and living things“ (cited in Paloutzian and Park 2005, 26). Informants pointed to their spiritual needs, but in reality, they do not belong to any church – they describe themselves as “spiritual” rather than “religious” persons (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, cited in Jerotijević and Hagovská 2020, 44). This doesn’t mean that they explicitly refuse Christian teachings, but their affiliation to a specific church or religion yes (Versteeg 2011, 5).

For example, as I mentioned above, one of the informants, after her divorce, switched from traditional religion (which she had shared with her previous partner) to alternative spirituality, along with her daughter and current partner. Various problems that she had felt before or during her divorce, or in the difficult period afterwards, led her to spirituality, which Jerotijević and Hagovská (2020) describe as more subjective, emphasizing the importance of freedom and the personal experiences of individuals (44–45). Her faith in God and the supernatural reality did not change; rather, according to her own words, her values and goals were transformed as she freed herself from certain customary conventions. This 43-year-old female expressed this to me:

I don't go to church... I don't belong to any religion – I don't have that need. But to sit down every day and connect with God in some way – whether it's in meditation, in prayer, or just in thought – that's the kind of need I have... Spirituality is probably better than faith... I don't go to society to confess my spirituality... It's enough for me in private [Zita].

Alternative spirituality is rather subjective for the research sample, specifically in their way of coping with various problems. The individual faith they practice, using prayer or meditation, is an important form of “self-transcendence”, as described by Viktor E. Frankl (2011, 94). This allows them to calm down, detach themselves from everyday problems or affairs, and focus their attention on their main spiritual values and goals. Baumeister (1991) states that the meaning system is significantly shaped by “surrounding culture (including parents, media and other cultural agents), and through [one's] accumulated personal experiences“ (cited in Paloutzian and Park 2005, 298). For people whose global sense is disrupted, spirituality may be the key [to] the search for meaning and explanations because it can provide them with answers to various existential questions, even those of a transcendent nature (Paloutzian and Park 2005, 334–335). However, as I note below, my informants have not been following the media for years – they don't even have them. Based on these and similar findings, I focused on other questions – especially on the specific life philosophies of the informants, as well as on the relationship between these philosophies and their life experiences and life events. I argue that these philosophies arise from their life experiences.

The influence of alternative spirituality on the worldviews and philosophies of the research sample

In its essence, alternative spirituality is connected to systems of various worldviews and philosophies that impact the subjective attitudes of those who practice it (Taves et al. 2018, 1–14). Characteristic of spirituality are certain goals and types of behaviour that can help in their attainment (e.g., preferring kindness over indifference). Through interviews, I gained an understanding of the many philosophies that the informants found interesting, and at the same time were implemented in their lives, such as the importance of altruism, a key goal associated with spirituality. Wisdom and feelings of the heart, or so-called “connections” to the sacred, are other concepts that are characteristic

(Paloutzian and Park 2005, 300). I will explain these connections in the next answer, from a 42-year-old male informant:

I mainly have my heart and that's what I follow when anything needs to be resolved. I'm trying to live in harmony with it and to develop wisdom throughout my life. Because in the wisdom of the heart is collected everything that is needed. And if a person lives in the present moment – that's the way of avoiding many unnecessary sufferings that we create ourselves [Oto].

The informant came to the practice of alternative spirituality mainly through his former health problems. In the interview, he mentioned that during high school, he was diagnosed with serious heart problems, as well as various allergies and food intolerances. Subsequently, he decided to leave the urban environment and got a job at a mountain cottage. The natural environment and new colleagues led him to alternative spirituality, which he still practices. After fourteen years, during which he was employed at the same cottage, he moved to the locality where this research was made. He belongs to the founders of the researched community. In addition to other forms of alternative spiritual practices and the search for the sacred, he actively devotes himself to mountain portering. In his words, he presently enjoys good health and tries to prevent various diseases in many ways – e.g., by bathing in an icy stream. In his answer, in addition to the need to develop the wisdom of the heart, he also mentions a philosophy that is focused on “living in the present moment” or “here-and-now”. This philosophy is described in more detail by Woodhead et al. (2002, 429).

Persons practicing alternative spirituality often tend to create so-called “packages of meaning” that may contain syncretisms of various faiths and philosophies – mostly spiritual or religious teachings and traditions that are chosen freely and according to preference (Bloch 1998, 59; Bužeková 2019, 413). Consequently, I was interested in the other philosophies prevalent in this community. Informants often share their philosophies, especially during their meetings in the community – even though each member's “package” does not contain identical syncretisms of different views and beliefs. This is evident in the fact that some believe in God, while others believe in some higher force or cosmic energy. Some even believe in the existence of supernatural mythological beings (e.g., forest fairies, goblins, or angels who help people) and others don't. As a result, the importance of non-judgment is often emphasized and replaced with acceptance. Many informants stress the importance of freedom

and personal experience, and these philosophies need not be limited by various dogmas or moral principles (Fuller 2001, 5, cited in Jerotijević and Hagoovská 2020, 44). In the context of personal and spiritual growth, they can have their own experiences that help them in the search for meaning and truth, or the formation of “packages of meaning” (Paloutzian and Park 2005, 309, 481; Frankl 2011, 103, 127). This importance of freedom and personal experiences is the other reason why some of these communities distance themselves from the Christian faith, or from the need to belong to a traditional church (Versteeg 2011, 5). Alternative spirituality can also be a form of liberation from certain customary conventions.

Areas of health and attitudes towards the coronavirus pandemic

People who practice alternative spirituality can often lean towards different unconventional approaches – e.g., in the areas of health or sources of information. The majority of the studied community (9 out of 10 informants) prefers alternative forms of medicine and has a sceptical, even dismissive attitude towards biomedicine and the pharmaceutical industry (Jerotijević and Hagoovská 2019, 53; 2020, 48). Some of the informants expressed this opposition similarly, such as this 20-year-old female:

Sometimes we also take natural nutritional supplements [note – Ayurvedic medicine]... but no chemistry... I haven't put a single medicine in my mouth for about five years [Zuzana].

The majority of female informants (4 out of 5) prefer Ayurvedic medicine and vegetarian or vegan diets. Their attitude toward health, as well as their way of eating, is an integral part of their lifestyle and holistic worldviews. This points to the fact that male informants also prefer holistic and natural approaches to health, such as Ayurvedic medicine, but they still eat meat. Informants do not visit doctors often, if at all. Their inclination toward alternative medicine is reflected in their preference for natural treatment methods, or the use of medicinal herbs or extracts. They usually treat their illnesses by staying in nature or resting in bed. In the following statement is important to note the reason why informants do not visit doctors. They perceive prevalent biomedicine as a health system that is – also in connection with the pharmaceutical industry

– mainly focused on the treatment of various symptoms of diseases and not their cause (Bužeková 2019, 413). Additionally, their holistic worldviews and philosophies arguably are lacking a certain spiritual dimension (Ward & Voas 2011, 103). Belief in the deeper cause of diseases was expressed, for example, in the following statement of the 16-year-old female informant:

[My attitude towards doctors] is quite dismissive – if I don't have to, I don't go there... Every problem has some origin and for example, biomedicine simply does not solve problems, it rather suppresses them... That rapid change is exactly like white medicine... I am treated with Ayurveda – herbs, teas, rest, and thinking about it all – why did it happen to me [Patrícia].

A more serious illness that some informants have gone through in their lives gradually led them to the search for its spiritual cause and deeper meaning. They changed some of their opinions, beliefs, and lifestyle choices, within which they presently do not rely primarily on biomedicine. Their time spent in nature undoubtedly also has a significant influence on the formation of their opinions in the area of health and prevention, which most of them consider very important. For example, some of them regularly bathe in an icy stream that is located in the forest near their homes. One of the informants who years ago was diagnosed with severe asthma and tinnitus (a constant buzzing in the ears) claims that these health problems were one of the several reasons for his current practice of alternative spirituality. Also for these diseases, his priorities changed, as well as his overall lifestyle – he left the city to live in nature. As mentioned, his dwelling is built near a noisy stream, which he considers to be the main source of his good immunity (by bathing in it), as well as his peaceful sleep, because it can “*drown out the buzzing in his ears*” (Belo).

Another reason he mentioned in the interview was his divorce. Additionally, he mentioned that he liked to visit this researched locality as a teenager during summer camps. All of these facts may be the driving force behind why he belongs among the founders of the researched community. He was the first one to move into the described location. Severe asthma and tinnitus were also repeated in the statements of other informants, who perceive this natural environment, their community, and the practice of alternative spirituality as significant forms of coping with their health problems. Other informants often pointed out various allergies and food intolerances, or their former heart problems, which they claim to have cured through this lifestyle.

The interviews also show that the majority of informants (8 out of 10) applied their attitudes and beliefs from the area of health also on the coronavirus pandemic – specifically on vaccination. To the question of whether they plan to get vaccinated, they answered, for example, in the following way:

No, and I don't even plan to... I don't trust it... and I don't identify with it either. If someone else feels it, let them get vaccinated... It's everyone's free decision... More important is how I prevent myself from getting sick in the first place. And that way is to have a healthy and positive mind, joy from little things, diet, and especially sports and strengthening myself [Oto].

Everyone, they believe, should be vaccinated by free choice, while they themselves have rather a negative and dismissive attitude towards the vaccine. The majority of informants (8 out of 10) perceive vaccines as “*developed too rapidly*” and “*insufficiently tested in practice*” – that is why they consider it risky and are concerned about possible side effects. In our conversations, they also mentioned people they know and whose bodies – despite their relatively young age and good health or physical condition – reacted unfavourably to vaccination against the coronavirus. This means that some of their acquaintances have experienced an acute deterioration of mental health or a psychological condition that needed to be solved with professional help, partial or even complete paralysis, or death. These tragic or difficult events they considered to be causally connected to vaccination against the coronavirus because they occurred in these persons' lives approximately two weeks after they got vaccinated. As a result of this information, as well as their negative attitude towards biomedicine and the pharmaceutical industry, the majority of informants (8 out of 10) did not get vaccinated with any of the offered COVID-19 vaccines. These reasons are also associated with the fact that the research sample considers this community to be the most reliable source of their information and knowledge, which I discuss in more detail in the next subsection (Howarth 2001, 1). Most of the informants do not plan to get vaccinated against the coronavirus, even in the future. Several of them considered governmental measures to be sufficient protection against the spread of infection. During the pandemic, they had no problem with compliance – if they, so to speak, did not interfere too much with their freedom and lifestyle. During certain governmental measures, they could move freely in a natural environment. They found most measures and rules in the cities during the lockdowns excessive. Even during the pandemic, the majority of the

research sample (8 out of 10 informants) expressed a preference for building their immunity through overcoming the disease, not through vaccination. Based on the claims of Ward and Voas (2011) and the classifications of Barnes et al. (2008), I argue that the negative attitude of the research sample towards the COVID-19 vaccines is a consequence of their preference for alternative forms of medicine that are holistic (i.e., also including the spiritual side of a person) and thus are simultaneously more compatible with their spirituality and strong belief in the need for freedom and personal experiences, as written about by Jerotijević and Hagovská (2020, 44).

Sources of information

During meetings of the researched community, informants share their stories. They share their opinions and philosophies, as well as information related to the coronavirus pandemic or government measures. Some informants who have jobs and permanent residences in big cities claimed that they got their information about the pandemic only from verified websites online. However, the majority of the research sample (7 out of 10 informants) does not seek such information purposefully. According to their words “*they live with what is around them*” (e.g. *Móric*) – which means that information that they consider necessary and credible is drawn primarily from their friends in the researched community. The same is also the case with information about the pandemic – because according to them, they heard about the coronavirus and related situations “*everywhere they went*” (e.g. *Belo*). This community considered the government’s measures excessive and difficult to follow – they followed them and tried to prevent the spread of infection, especially in the city and restricted areas in which a larger number of people moved about. Based on these and other similar statements that I draw from various interviews and participant observations, this community is arguably the main source of informants’ knowledge and ideas (Howarth 2001, 1). Their access to sources of information is also connected to their dismissive attitude towards social media, which they do not have or for which they cancelled their accounts in the past. They find information from social media confusing and overwhelming. This conclusion comes, for example, from the following statement from one of the female informants:

I cancelled television, I try not to listen to the radio either... I needed to preserve one line, so I turned everything off and it helped me. I drew information about

the pandemic from official pages and final statements... Facebook and all those debates are unacceptable to me. It's all overwhelming for me; I don't feel good about it [Zita].

Informants share their attitudes about the pandemic or vaccination exclusively with each other, or with other close people within personal contact. They mostly have a negative attitude toward social media – which at the same time excludes their possible positive attitude towards “alternative influencers” and their strong influence on the internet (Baker 2021, 19, 30; Ward and Voas 2011). For various theories about spirituality related especially to people belonging to alternative communities, I expected that my informants would also tend to believe in certain conspiracy theories (Baker 2021, 14–15, Parmigiani 2021, 1). Even if most of them are not interested in the general things happening in their home country or the world and do not use social media, I found certain similarities between them and some descriptions written by Ward and Voas (2011). These similarities are mainly related to their rejecting attitude towards publicly available media or other sources of information, which they have not followed for a long time. This attitude is also significantly related to their faith in conspiracy theories, which several informants mentioned during interviews. They include, for example, beliefs in certain powerful, manipulative, and controlling elites – within the framework of the weather and information presented in the media, even during the coronavirus pandemic – or belief in UFOs, etc. (Ward and Voas 2011, 107; Parmigiani 2021, 15). One of the male informants expressed this belief in the following statement:

Airplanes that flew during quarantines and lockdowns released ‘white tails’ behind them, which were also supposed to help in purifying the air. Those who manage it know very well what they are doing and in what kind of state our planet is in [Oto].

These and other similar beliefs of some informants I also captured in various participant observations from the field. For example, during one of their walks in the forest, one of the informants pointed to the sky and noted that a few clouds looked like UFOs. Subsequently, he started taking pictures of these clouds and he began to talk to two female informants who were with him about his belief in extra-terrestrial civilizations. In their reactions, it was not entirely clear whether they identified with this belief or not, but they were not explicitly dismissive about the statement.

Discussion and conclusion

In this work, the publication I refer to the most is Paloutzian and Park (2005), whose central concept was the main framework in which I incorporated knowledge from other texts and research. In the following short passage, I mention facts that are also characteristic of the research sample, but I do not discuss them in the main part of the work.

In various discussions, I encounter opinions that the spiritual needs and explanations of informants – which concern, for example, the COVID-19 pandemic or political or other life events – may be related to their low level of education. One of the arguments by which claims of this kind can be refuted is the fact that the majority of the research sample (7 out of 10 informants) had attained a university degree. In other conversations that I had with some people, I also encountered opinions that certain philosophies of members of the researched community are “naive and idealized” or even “phantasmagorical”. According to Tacey (2004), such views held by persons who practice alternative spirituality cannot be considered unusual. Based on an analysis of the research data, it can be argued that the life philosophies of the research sample are significantly connected to their holistic beliefs and worldviews, which are shaped by their community, as well as the natural environment, in which they spend a lot of time (Howarth 2001, 1; Ward and Voas 2011, 103; Taves et al. 2018, 1–14). Also, it cannot be forgotten that their spiritual, natural, and communal way of life is a consequence of their free choice. Many of the informants voluntarily exchanged the urban environment for a rural one, as they had not felt well in it, or it did not fit well with their values and meaning system (e.g., because it had a high degree of various stressors). Social isolation, which we can infer from some of their statements that they experience, is not inherently connected with their alternative spirituality. As mentioned, in-depth interviews show that many members of the researched community have experienced life in the city. If in some cases we can talk about social isolation, research has shown that it is a result of the coronavirus pandemic and related government measures, rather than the development of their meaning system. I claim that the possible social isolation of informants cannot be related to their community and alternative lifestyle. Their voluntary isolation from the perhaps more formal, institutional, and dogmatic direction of religion can be considered as a consequence of their practice of alternative spirituality (Versteeg 2011, 5).

Before entering the field, I expected that alternative spirituality and its practice could help informants to find meaning and to understand certain situations with which they are, or have been, confronted in life. This research deals specifically with situations that disrupted their quality and way of life – i.e., separations and divorces with partners, or serious health problems. These situations subsequently led them to search for new spiritual meanings. Based on the literature listed below, I expected that these circumstances led them to alternative life philosophies that can be reflected, for example, in the fields of health or sources of information.

It turned out that the research sample tends to be holistic in significant worldviews and philosophies that are characteristic of alternative spirituality. Most informants prefer alternative forms of medicine, such as Ayurveda, while they refuse the prevalent biomedical health system associated with the pharmaceutical industry. This approach was also significantly manifested during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic when most of them refused to be vaccinated and preferred instead to build their immunity – also through overcoming the given disease. They consider the coronavirus to be a lower risk than the vaccination against it. They don't visit doctors often, if at all. If they get sick, in most cases they try to look for a deeper, spiritual cause and meaning of their health problems. Instead, they cure themselves with natural nutritional supplements and herbs. They try to prevent diseases and health problems by, for example, bathing in the icy stream that flows near their dwellings in the forest. They perceive the natural environment in which they live and spend most of their time as very important and beneficial for their health. For this reason, the majority of the research sample moved there from an urban environment in the past or plans to move there permanently in the future (8 out of 10 informants). They consider cities, especially big cities, to be polluted and environmentally burdened, which according to their statements adversely affects their overall health. The identifiable values and goals associated with alternative spirituality are different in the research sample. Most informants consider it important to search for the sacred – God or another form of higher power or energy, which they perceive as healing, liberating, and strengthening – especially in nature. They connect their spiritual needs with the preference of individual faith, i.e., prayer or meditation. They also consider hiking and engaging in sports in nature to be a dynamic form of meditation, because these activities and the given environment connect with their spirituality and search for the sacred. Most of the male informants are also active in the sphere of mountain portering.

They perceive this activity as a manifestation of altruism, which belongs to their spiritual goals. Informants tend towards spiritual and developmental literature (i.e., they like to read books with spiritual themes), as well as altruistic values, goals, and behaviour – towards each other, towards others, and nature. As it turns out, the researched community, for informants, is the most important source of their information, social representations, and knowledge. Most of them do not have media or social media, as they perceive information from such sources as confusing or overwhelming. Those they trust the most are persons with whom they meet in personal contact and know well. Even during the pandemic, due to various government measures, this circle of close people narrowed down mainly to family, neighbours, and friends – especially those who belong to the researched community. Those they consider the most reliable are persons who also practice alternative spirituality and for whom the associated values are visible in their behaviour – or have life philosophies that informants evaluate as similar to their own. Research has also confirmed the inclination of some from the research sample to spirituality – to the belief in certain conspiracy theories that are connected with spirituality. Among the most important can be included, for example, belief in a certain powerful global elite that worldwide can manipulate not only the weather but also the information that is presented to the general public through the media. Also for this reason, some of the research subjects have refused to watch television, read newspapers, or listen to the radio for many years.

In conclusion, it should be added that more detailed field research of the given community would be needed for a longer time. Even with the growing number of research related to the issue of alternative spirituality, research data over time could arguably be subjected to a deeper analysis again.

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