Alternative Spirituality

Poland, Jan 20–Sep 5, 2026
Deadline: Sep 5, 2026

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Alternative Spirituality: Counter-Normativity, Rejected Epistemologies, Epistemologies of the Rejected.
Thematic issue of Przegląd Kulturoznawczy, edited by Justyna Balisz-Schmelz and Marta Kudelska.

Over the past decade, scholarly reflection in the humanities, as well as cultural and artistic practices, has witnessed a growing interest in questions of spirituality, inner experience, and alternative forms of knowledge. Drawing on Robert C. Fuller's notion of being "spiritual but not religious" (Fuller, 2001), this shift does not entail a return to institutional religion or an affirmation of religious belief. Spirituality—understood as a need for meaning, values, and experiences of existential depth—can, in fact, remain fully compatible with an atheist stance (Comte-Sponville, 2022).

The process of re-spiritualization is simultaneously linked to a growing interest in marginalized and rejected forms of knowledge, as well as to attempts to make sense of experience outside the paradigm of Enlightenment rationalism (Hanegraaff, 2025; Greenwood, 2005). From this perspective, alternative spirituality—understood as a historically shaped counter-tradition to religious orthodoxy and rationalism—becomes a space for questioning dominant cognitive models, notions of scientificity, and ways of understanding the world, as well as for reflecting on the power relations that sustain these frameworks and the underlying forms of epistemic violence they produce ("Hypatia," 2006).

The contemporary turn toward alternative spirituality manifests itself in diverse artistic and curatorial practices, as well as in social design, activism, and the search for new forms of community. In many recent artistic practices, spirituality is explored as a space of healing, regeneration, and affective engagement with the immaterial—both at individual and collective levels (Greenwood, 2005; Enstedt & Plank, 2023). Practices such as ritual, meditation, energy work, or activities drawing on esoteric traditions are mobilized as means of engaging with systems of oppression, while also operating as forms of alternative knowledge production. Particularly noteworthy in this context are feminist (Hale, 2021; Kosmina, 2023), queer (Österman, 2021), and decolonial forms of spirituality (Domańska, Sojka, 2024/2025), which are embedded in a broader movement to reclaim practices previously disparaged as irrational, magical, or primitive.

In this issue, we seek to examine the turn toward alternative spirituality both as a symptom of contemporary cultural transformations (Kellner, 2025) and as an experimental strategy of counter-normativity—understood as the rejection of dominant cognitive and cultural frameworks (Hanegraaff,

2025). Wouter Hanegraaff's concept of rejected knowledge—that is, knowledge displaced beyond the boundaries of recognized discourses—enables an understanding of alternative spirituality as a form of resistance to modernist and Western-centric epistemological norms. From a postcolonial perspective, the very project of modernity, together with its cognitive normativity, can be understood as historically and culturally situated within a Western epistemic framework. What has been deemed undesirable knowledge or "the Other of reason" often turns out to be Indigenous knowledge, non-European ontologies, or forms of spirituality grounded in relationality and collectivity (Domańska, Sojka, 2024/2025).

The turn toward alternative spirituality also aligns with new ways of thinking about the humanities—as a space of affirmation and hope (Federici, 2018), radical reinterpretations of theory (Merrifield, 2011), and practices of deskilling ("Hypatia," 2006). Moreover, it enables the highlighting and revaluation of artistic and cultural practices previously marginalized in research (Baudin, Johnsson, 2004; Woynarowski; Kaiser, 2022; Balisz-Schmelz, Dworniczak, 2025), while also allowing them to be approached as living, relational forms of knowledge that open the humanities to experimental and affective experience (Greenwood, 2005).

Simultaneously, it should be noted that the turn toward alternative spirituality is not without tensions and risks. Contemporary fascination with spirituality—for which popular culture remains a primary channel of dissemination (Partridge, 2004, 2006; Kosmina, 2023; Corcoran, 2025)—can easily become commodified, transforming into an element of neoliberal self-care culture, consumer spirituality, apolitical escapism, or even conservative appropriation (Muzyczuk, 2025). Rather than challenging dominant structures of knowledge and power, it may instead reinforce or reproduce them, offering an illusory sense of individual development without meaningful social change (Purser, 2019). Within the humanities, there is also a risk of reifying the concept of "spirituality" as a vague, universalizing category detached from specific historical, political, and class contexts.

For this reason, we encourage critical reflection on how spirituality functions within the fields of culture and art—both as a language of alternative possibilities and as a potential instrument of depoliticization, normativization, or commodification. We welcome analyses of engaged and emancipatory spiritual practices, as well as case studies in which alternative spirituality contributes to the reproduction of power relations, exclusion, or symbolic violence.

Contributions may be either theoretically oriented or empirically grounded, and based on new, experimental methodologies. We are particularly interested in work addressing the following areas:

· The processing and adaptation of alternative spirituality in popular, visual, and digital culture.
· The deployment of alternative spiritual languages in art to address epistemic violence, ecological crises, and embodied experiences.
· Alternative spiritualities as means of reconstructing marginalized forms of knowledge, memory, and community in contemporary culture and art.
· The role of alternative spirituality in rethinking Western cultures through the lens of center-periphery relations and global knowledge flows.
· The effects of intensified engagement with alternative spirituality on the cultures of marginalized regions and communities, and their interactions with hegemonic cultural narratives.

· Unconventional spiritual practices and their implications for understanding locality, including place, memory, and alternative local cultural ontologies.
· Alternative spirituality as a component of experimental educational practices, relational pedagogies, and unlearning strategies.
· The significance of alternative spiritual practices in therapy and somatic work, and their impact on cultural models of health and subjectivity.
· Alternative spirituality as a missing dimension in the cultural canon, illustrated through case studies of “erased” creators.
· Queer magic, feminist rituals, witchcraft, and ecstatic embodied practices as gestures of emancipation.

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