



New Age Spirituality in Argentina: Cultural Change and Epistemological Challenge

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Abstract

This article analyzes a form of spirituality known as New Age in Argentina and argues that the heterogeneous space of current spiritualities is the cause and effect of a sociocultural transformation that goes beyond the religious field in form and content, challenging both the supposed dominant position of Catholicism and secularism that characterizes Argentinean culture. To this end, and taking into account a historical dimension, our analysis indicates how these spiritualities condense a constellation of languages and experiences of energy, positive philosophy, ecology, vegetarianism, and personal growth, focusing on personal autonomy and immanence. Secondly, the work emphasizes how the phenomenon of massification of this type of practices forces us to rethink both the changes that have occurred in the “religious field” and the epistemological foundations that inspire this kind of analysis, and even the concept of religion itself as associated with explicit belief systems and the church as privileged traits.

Keywords New age spirituality · Argentina · Cultural change · Epistemology

Introduction

At an event that commemorates the most important political date on Argentina’s civic calendar, May 25, a date that recalls the country’s independence revolution and the mythical foundation of the Nation, a *Te Deum* is offered by the Archbishop of Buenos Aires and is attended by the president. On this occasion, Mauricio Macri, the current president who claims to sympathize with Buddhist ideology, caused a certain amount of

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commotion when in the middle of the *Te Deum* he was clearly unable to make the sign of the cross. This produced a small media scandal that filled the pages of newspapers and social networks and revealed an unthinkable scene in the most common ways of living the relationship between religion and the public sphere in Argentina. We believe that the scene is symptomatic of a much broader process, which is present both in the so-called political sphere but mainly in daily encounters and infinite scenes in institutions of education, health, or family, revealing two processes. Firstly, a process of liberalization and secularization still little analyzed that goes far beyond identities, the sense of belonging and allegiance to normative systems of Catholicism. Secondly, and associated with the first, a shift towards a type of spiritualized religiosity centered on a language and practices of enchanted intimacy, which in many cases includes Catholicism itself.

The process is neither new nor unknown. In fact, over the last decade, a set of works that prioritizes a more pragmatic and situated approach to analyzing this phenomenon has demonstrated that the most general diagnosis of the spiritualization of religion that would simply imply a subjectivization (Bellah et al. 1985; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Champion and Hervieu-Léger 1990) can be nuanced. It is even the case with Hanegraaff's perspective that underlines the general matrix of secular and "scientific" popular culture behind New Age religion but excessively stresses the "individual manipulation of existing symbolic systems" (Hanegraaff 1999, p. 152). Some authors suggest thinking of spirituality, including that identified with the New Age style, on the basis of complex and new processes in constructing relationships and mediations that cannot simply be reduced to "freedom of choice," "personal responsibility," "self-authority," or "emotionalism" (Altglas 2016; Wood 2010). They also suggest that academics should focus on how spirituality is socially produced, traversed by gender, class, and differentiated national contexts, and also as a new form of intervention in the public arena (Bender and Mcroberts 2012).

In Argentina, in addition to acquiring a certain uniqueness, this movement is revealed as a way of thought that challenges our representation of contemporary religious transformation as well as the categories available to us to reflect on it. Alejandro Frigerio has reviewed some of this critical movement on the most classical approaches in the study of spirituality (Frigerio 2016), particularly on the problem posed by studies that exaggerate "mixing," "syncretism," and "hybridization" without considering specific cultural logics that embody New Age spiritualities (Frigerio 2013). We understand "spirituality" practically in two complementary senses: as a mode of cosmological relationship and as a kind of identity. Firstly, as a native category, spirituality is used to describe a non-hierarchical kind of relationship with the sacred, mostly but not always associated with "no-religion." Secondly, we also understand the term as a resource to produce personal and collective identification. Taking into account that the problem of spirituality is much more complex than New Age spirituality, because it also includes Christian, Jewish, and other religious roots, in this paper, we understand spirituality in a broader sense, but particularly as part of the so-called New Age milieu.

Argentina, at least its public sphere, has been identified as having a dominant presence of Catholicism, which has been transformed in the last decades showing a more diverse religious field (Mallimaci 2008; Frigerio 2007).¹ Some voices warn us as to how little we

¹ In institutional terms, the Argentinean State still recognizes Catholicism as the most important religious reference, with preeminence over other religions in public spaces and even in the National Constitution.

know of the religious diversity that actually existed throughout the twentieth century and about the real impact of Catholic domination in daily life (Frigerio 2007, 2018). These voices make us think of a greater degree of diversity than is usually recognized, and an influence that, although at times powerful, also had nuances, twists, and vanishing points. However, it is clear that since the post-democratic period of the 1980s, pluralism has grown while the influence of Catholicism has suffered a relative decline. In this context, a series of non-Catholic religious ideas and practices are visible, the result of processes of more general religious transnationalization and local cultural liberalization. Here, we can see the emergence of a current that has redefined the consistency of what we academically understand by “religion.” It is often depicted as a given and abstractly defined system of ideas and norms and understood as a hierarchical social structured institution. We believe that New Age spirituality lends it new meanings and takes on a different form in social life. New Age-style spirituality, partly cause and partly effect of a sociocultural transformation, is at the center of a change that extends beyond the religious field in form and content.²

It is not only a question of the emergence of new beliefs but something that underlies them: the growth in gravitation of a religiosity that went from being a concern that was either esoteric or Orientalist, or perhaps both, relatively confined in minority groups, to becoming a platform of practices and representations that incorporate common sense, an expanded spiritual resource that affects the religious field in its logic, its distributions, and the way it is conceived. To understand this current, we need to analyze the process in which this form of religiosity is engendered by looking at three moments that allow us to understand both the history of its implementation and its current characteristics: the first articulations at the time of supposed Catholic homogeneity, its relationship with the religious movements that emerged in the USA from the 60s onwards, and its massification in the last three decades. At those moments, it was significant to address simultaneous processes that had to do with other resources and subjectivation linked to the dissemination of psychological knowledge and access to mass culture that, without being exclusive, characterized the experience of the Argentine urban middle sectors.

This work describes that genesis and also certain contemporary experiences that we have recorded in a joint analysis on the emergence of a semantic and practical field linked to spirituality in the city of Buenos Aires, prioritizing innovation and mediations between subjects and non-human forces and agents, as well as the production of subjectivities over the legitimate or illegitimate positions of religious groups and their “periphery” or “centrality” in relation to Catholicism. It is the result of both an immersion into the historical conditions of possibility and contemporary New Age spirituality in the

² We understand New Age spirituality as the articulation of an “expectation of transformation that initially continues the autonomy aspirations of certain moments in the culture of the urban middle classes and their processes of individualization. All this in a framework in which the religious or spiritual are recovered in terms that emphasize their immanent character and their link with reflection processes that “rediscover” the sacred in interiority and in overcoming “psychic” conflicts, but, at the same time, they see them as a continuum that encompasses, in the here and now, bodies, emotions, nature and, often, material achievements (Carozzi 1999, 2000, 2002). For a regional perspective and the blurred frontiers between New Age and mass culture in general, far beyond class configurations, see De la Torre and Gutiérrez Zúñiga (2013). As these authors point out, the articulation between New Age and native cosmologies seems quite relevant in other parts of Latin America. In Argentina, however, although those articulations exist, the New Age Spirituality appears less open to include indigenous characteristics. The reasons for this are too extensive to describe here but are probably related with “Europeism” in national imaginaries of race and alterity.

metropolitan area of Buenos Aires. The focus of our research is on a series of contemporary manifestations embodied in public speeches, daily conversations, ritual practices, and products of the cultural industry. Given the socio-morphological heterogeneity of the current phenomenon, we focus on various localized manifestations that involve articulations with specific spiritual traditions, such as the case of Claudio María Domínguez, a media mentor in Argentinean New Age spirituality who articulates Catholicism with Oriental sensibilities and followers of public events organized by the socio-spiritual movement called *The Art of Living*, a westernized and transnational version of Hinduism that has strong public visibility in Argentina. In both spaces, we have analyzed their presence in the mass media and in the cultural industry and carried out participant observation in public activities and in-depth interviews with reference figures and followers. Also, and above all, we have shared activities of daily life with those involved and recorded the immersion experience in field notes. This article will suggest that de-linking the analysis of these transformations in contemporary religiosity from broader processes that exceed the “strictly religious” is problematic. Therefore, we understand that we need to be aware of how the religious is both impulse and consequence of non-religious social and cultural transformations or, ultimately, of how from an analysis of New Age-style spirituality—but perhaps beyond that—the religious cannot be understood as being a specific “sphere” of the social.

Spiritual Ruptures at the beginning of the Twentieth Century

The image of an Argentine Catholic monopoly brings with it the risks of claiming a past of Catholic homogeneity, and of assuming a complex religious sensitivity as a novelty that, in reality, has permeated daily life for decades. The first decades of the twentieth century enabled public discussion on issues related to spirituality and ways of bending the sacred that incorporate early elements of an Orientalist matrix. Thus, there emerges a configuration that attempts to reconcile modernity, the sacred and notions of totality that are opposed to segmentation between the physical, the moral, the individual, and the social realms. A reconstruction of the networks of Latin American *fin-de-siècle* spiritualism shows that, at least in the literate world but certainly beyond that, interest in both spiritual and Oriental themes came together in a broad and heterogeneous religious sensibility that was much more complex than that which takes Catholicism as the only religious resource.

The influence of Eastern culture in the first half of the twentieth century mobilized a complex intellectual culture. From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, Oriental spiritualism had already attracted journalists, writers, and intellectuals who circulated on the borders of dominant Catholicism and even around creative syntheses between a secularist tradition and an interest in non-institutional forms of the sacred. The interest in Eastern religions was heterogeneous and could not be ascribed to a single faction or ideological tendency. It mostly occurred among intellectuals of liberal and socialist origin but also among positivists and Catholics. It was a broad current centered on intimacy and Orientalized spirituality that manifested itself in literary culture. The circulation of important Oriental works translated into Spanish, such as *One Thousand and One Nights*, the *Ramayana*, the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, or the discovery of the work of Indian philosopher Rabindranath Tagore revealed a hitherto unsuspected

Oriental sensibility and consolidated a cultural innovation movement based on Eastern ideology that would have long-lasting consequences (Bergel 2015; Gasquet 2007).

The process of European immigration and the early processes of religious transnationalization made spiritism and theosophy, along with other occult movements, currents that spread with increasing fervor among Argentine urban sectors. The advantage of not assuming non-Catholic religious diversity exclusively in terms of religious “groups”, coherent cosmological systems attached to them and, above all, their peripheral place in terms of Catholicism, allows us to analyze the presence of concepts and practices deriving from spiritualist traditions and theosophy in the broader culture of the time, which includes both the literate sectors and their drifts in the popular world. This could help us to better understand a constellation of cosmological elements and forms of social participation that do not correspond to the ideal central Christian model of a coherent religious system and an exclusive adherence to religious groups. On the contrary, at that time, it would already seem that syncretism and fragmentary and occasional circulation were habitual.

Spiritism, inspired by the lessons of contact with the “spiritual world” of the Frenchman Allan Kardec, and theosophy, an eclectic current that integrates naturism, astrology, Gnosticism and Hinduism, promoted by the famous Helena Blavatsky, enjoyed significant influence in Argentina (Bianchi 1992; Santamaría 1992). They did so in relation to scientific, literary, and political imagination (Barrancos 2011; Quereillac 2016), but they were also transferred to spaces of Argentine popular religiosity in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Kardecist spiritism is central as it is based on a sustained influence on middle sectors and also on the popular world. Beyond orthodox Kardecism, which is a key element in the configuration of diverse religious practices in the first decades of the twentieth century, the example of the Basilio Scientific School, an exclusively Argentine denomination, was significant. The Basilio was a type of spiritism adapted to the urban life of Argentina that incorporated a series of elements of vernacular Catholicism and, after the decade of 1940, it expanded very rapidly following the path of other phenomena of culture and mass politics (Ludueña 2011). On the other hand, it is worth highlighting the emblematic case of a popular version of spiritism in the cult of Pancho Sierra, which showed participation networks without group adhesion and syncretism between spiritism and technologies of an expanded conception of the self-identified with “curanderismo,” which were inspired by ancient matrices of popular Catholicism and humoral medicine configuration (Chavez 1977).

Both spiritism and theosophy were rooted in personal and collective long-term projects, in dialog with the European secular world of which they were direct heirs. The emphasis on moral perfection and physical therapy placed them between secularization and magic, in an intermediate position between the enchanted—and even mystical versions of popular Catholicism and the naturalistic models of positivism and also the secularized versions of Romanized Catholicism. They shared with the latter a concern over social matters; with spiritualism and vitalism, the questioning of the radical division between the physical, social, and spiritual worlds; with positivism, the faith in progress, reason, and transformation. Thus, a premature combination between self-knowledge and physical, spiritual, and social perfection was configured,

which implied stable and lasting relations of exchange with the “beyond” in a religious language eminently indebted to science, technology, and modern urban life.³

Here, there is also a strong presence of utopian elements that evoke both personal as well as social improvement, and centrality of effort in an integrated conception of human evolution, or rather, an idea of perfection that is physical, moral, and spiritual. Spiritualism and theosophy, initially present both among Argentine intellectual elites at the beginning of the century and among immigrants, reveal a relative cultural affinity between them: they created a space for modern dialog that was evident through a common economy of the sacred removed from Catholicism.

Widely disseminated among urban middle sectors, the concerns for the individual well-being of the esoteric currents were, at the same time, a concern for the social and moral transformation of society that made the beyond a central axis of life.

The religious resources of Buenos Aires and the main urban centers of the country revealed a cultural landscape in which every promise of moral improvement (whether economic, political or therapeutic) could be carried out by articulating the inherited forms of the sacred with new scientific-technical devices. Far from promoting skepticism, the literate urban culture of the interwar years reinscribes the sacred in a language and in practices that illustrate the importance of new technologies and the dissemination of scientific knowledge (Sarlo 1988). In Romanized Catholicism, the horizon of the sacred (which remains transcendent and remote from the world) is separated from worldly scientific knowledge, in firm opposition to magical conceptions (often present in other versions of Catholicism itself) where sacred is immanent to the world. In the different versions of occultism and Argentine spiritualism, the sacred entered the everyday world through the language of the sciences of nature and interiority.⁴

Spirituality and Counterculture Since the 1960s

From the 1960s, the search for alternative modernities and alternatives to modernity found a respite and a broadening of their course, directing strong criticism towards hierarchies but with an increasingly visible social presence. As María Julia Carozzi (1999, 2000) points out, New Age religiosity was inspired by American counterculture, but spread throughout Latin America in a redefinition of the forms of authority. This redefinition formed part of a post-60s sociocultural macro movement of autonomy, which focused both on attaching value to a sacred self and on a process of

³ The key to personal transformation is its closeness to a “psychological configuration,” so it is no coincidence that the proto-history of psychological knowledge has certain points in common with spiritual traditions. Two examples are as curious as they are significant. In the first place, it is peculiar that the Institute of Psychology of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the University of Buenos Aires, created in 1931, had a “paranormal psychology” department inspired by spiritualist metapsychic science (Gimeno et al. 2010, p. 265). Secondly, it is also worth noting that James Mapelli made one of the first references to Sigmund Freud in Argentina. He was a doctor of Italian origin, hypnotist, and specialist in telepathic phenomena and founder of the “psycho-enervation” technique he developed at Pirovano Hospital (Vezzetti 1996, p. 45).

⁴ The consequences for religious diversity in Argentina during that period are still little studied. From a general and institutional perspective, but possibly from a cultural one as well, without doubt, the birth of Peronism was closely associated with Catholicism and the control of non-Catholic religions. Nevertheless, as Caimari (1995) highlights, the final period of the Peronist era was open to and receptive of different religious movements, such as Pentecostalism and Spiritism.

“cosmization” of everyday life. The discourse of personal change as a vehicle for social transformation; the transcendence of the idea of autonomy; the criticism of hierarchies; the demand for dualistic conceptions of body and soul, nature and culture, and the ability to resignify daily experience in a causal suffering and well-being logic based on the language of energy flow or blockage all acquired an unusual centrality. Let’s take a look at the historical process in which these notes were created.

It is often said that the 1960s condensed great social and cultural transformations in Western societies. “The 60s” are the decade of great changes: the first Moon landing, the Second Vatican Council, the Third World liberation movements, the US civil rights movements, and the anti-hierarchical critiques of European institutions. Above all, the 1960s also ideally represent a transformation in ordinary life and in subjectivation modes: the emergence of new lifestyles branded by a privilege of autonomy, which contrasts with what is usually imagined as being a relatively more hierarchical order in previous decades.

In the second half of the twentieth century, on the verge of a strong economic, social, and cultural modernization process of Argentine society, the dissemination of the American matrix counterculture—a critical perspective of the lifestyles that had characterized the Western societies of the postwar period—was consolidated (Cosse et al. 2010). That was the starting point for the first contacts with the experimental psychologies of the *Human Potential Movement* and an Orientalism that, unlike the one that characterized the first decades of the century, was centered in certain locations on the US west coast. The 1960s also stimulated the diffusion and professionalization of psychological knowledge (and of psychoanalysis in particular) in the psychotherapeutic environment and in Argentine society as a whole (Plotkin 2003; Vezzetti 1996). The psychological key in thinking of religiosity would appear through a process of religious change, of American characteristics, which would spread surreptitiously during the 1970s and that would insist on new languages of the sacred.

In a larger scenario, which included new alternative therapies centered on the body and the value of experience, a whole sensibility emerged around the term spirituality as a “holistic” wellness technology. During the 1970s, innovative experiences of cultural modernization incorporated redefinitions of religiosity in an autonomist key not only in the New Age horizon but even in Catholicism itself, which saw growth in spiritualist and charismatic movements. The process of cultural change developed in capillary fashion, implying a gradual transformation rather than a great revolution in customs. The relationship of this process with the political realities of the 1960s and 1970s, which involved protests and repression, was uneven: it was fueled by the concerns sparked by demonstrations, but, at the same time, it was one of the realms of replication and reworking of those concerns. Daily life was a space of cultural, sexual, and esthetic innovation that did not abandon the religious but found no satisfaction in traditional visions and experiences. It is precisely there that new traits were perceived, such as personal search, a need for transformation, and an immanent image of the sacred that spread, especially among young people from the middle sectors.

During the 1960s, different processes condensed and resulted in the emergence of a new social group: youth, a force which drove significant cultural transformations. Among the reasons explaining this process are the relative growth in secondary and university education over previous decades, the relative crisis of family models, and the transnationalization of cultural values and lifestyles linked to new practices of cultural

consumption and subjectivation. Rock n' roll and juvenile esthetics form a new sensibility that embraces the forms of linkage with the sacred. Among them are diffusion, still tenuous and restricted to avant-garde social spaces, of alternative spiritualities of non-Western origin as part of a general questioning of conventional lifestyles (Manzano 2017a, p. 210). As Manzano has recently suggested, spiritual and humanist ideas inspired in "inner transformation" influenced anti-authoritarian movements against dictatorship, sometimes articulated but often independent of political radicalism (Manzano 2017b).

The crisis of the Argentine dictatorship in the early 1980s brought with it a process of liberalization and democratization in daily life that redefined both the political regime and the modes of subjectivation. New knowledge and specialists, festivals, seminars with international guests and workshops stimulated the formation of a regional network, which brought together a literate sector of the middle classes with high sensitivity for Anglo-Saxon counterculture. This sector was attracted by the project of personal, ecological, and social transformation, only a partial heir to the vigor of the 60s. In this context, New Age religiosities condensed a series of new experiences traversed by languages of energy, positive philosophy, ecology, vegetarianism, and personal growth (Carozzi 2000). If the Christianities of a Pentecostal matrix emerged as a new phenomenon in the popular world, New Age spirituality did so among the urban middle sectors of Buenos Aires and other large urban centers in Argentina.

At that stage, which roughly extended to the 90s, specialized magazines, seminars, and meetings became the channel of privileged dissemination of the ideology of New Age spirituality in a way that did not fit the canonical conceptions of religion, if by that we understand an ecclesial organization and a coherent cosmological system. On the contrary, the New Age was a novel phenomenon that, from the outset, and even more in its expansive moment, was sinuous and difficult to delimit. The horizon of practices and ideas linked to it is broad and often heterogeneous, involving the incorporation of not strictly Western traditions, which are recreated in a New Age key and often unchecked by any religious or even spiritual reference (Bruce 2018; Campbell 2007). It ranges from the so-called neo-Hinduism, transnational versions of Hinduism adapted to contemporary Euro-American societies, to different expressions of Western Buddhism or neo-indigenous spiritualities. It also goes through more capillary discourses that do not identify with religious or spiritual regimes and that manifest themselves in esthetic, political, economic, or therapeutic practices and embody ideals of autonomy, communion with the totality and nature, principles of energy causality inaccessible to ordinary reason, and alternatives to science.

New Age Spirituality as a Social Language

The process of commodification of social life in recent decades in Latin America, as well as the transformation of the system of cultural industry mediations, accompanied the mass dissemination of New Age discourses and practices. The 1990s produced a consolidation and a diversification of religiosities, which decanted in other spaces beyond the intellectuality related to Orientalisms, countercultures or, above all, the informal networks of Argentine middle sectors. In the new era of the New Age, we coexisted with an accumulation of the effects of a historical evolution that led to the

installation of this religiosity in a wide space, beyond the control of the networks and institutions that drove them. Thus, the central signifiers of this type of spirituality had possibilities of expansion, association, and rearticulation that made them an available alternative in the universe of sense of broad social, cultural, and religious sectors. On the one hand, New Age spirituality was linked to market motives, consumption, and pleasure; on the other hand, it was linked to mass culture and with it increased its possibilities of approaching Christian imaginary.

A first dimension of the rearticulation of New Age postulates and practices in its widespread growth is related to its projection to questions of the market, of pleasure and, through this, of certain forms of individualism. The ideas that sustain the practices propose a sacred inner self that is accessed through rehabilitations, which may consist of readings, reflections, habits, diets, exercises, esthetic activities, travel, and a whole series of experiences that are disruptive of everyday life and that have been projected beyond the workshop, the group, or the small institution to objects and messages that enjoy massive circulation and establish new formats of community. Best sellers, television programs, and references preaching all possible supports promoted limited but possible versions of what was seen in formats for initiates with intense practices. The practices promoting differentiated, extraordinary, and life-giving knowledge were conceived as a miracle that invigorated other miracles. From the cultural industry that was sensitive to these beliefs, as well as from large-scale productions of different New Age movements, processes of exploration and affirmation of the inner divinity were promoted. In this context, wishes and desires of all kinds were legitimized: from those aimed at negotiating interpersonal relationships to those aimed at achieving economic objectives, including those that encompassed mental and physical health.

All this, which in another key can be seen as a purely psychological process, happens in these contexts as a process in which energies that lie beyond the individual psychic process are mobilized while including it. In this way, the world becomes “magical” by attributing a sacred character to the experience. But this sacredness is no longer situated in the hereafter, but is brought to “a nearer here”: the daily routine of unusual perceptions that are achieved through rituals that suspend the flow of the habitual in order to see it from another angle. For the multiple formulations of New Age spirituality in Argentina, this sacredness that ceases to be transcendent to become immanent and the experiences through which we connect with that dimension allow us to perceive our limits and our powers, break down false limits and barriers, and obtain objects and satisfactions that respond to the most diverse desires. Thus, self-discovery—the affirmation of one’s own powers, understood as part of a larger order of events that includes divinities and various energies—makes individual desires and the order of the world coincide in events that constitute sensual, consumerist, and earthly epiphanies.

Conferences and books on economic prosperity have become common in sectors linked to the business or executive world, based on an “integrated” conception of prosperity, personal development, and spirituality. There was an extension in the direction of apparently different spaces such as new psychologies, economic advisers, education, or work, which far exceed the therapeutic dimension, although they lend welfare a central value. In this way, the New Age produces a form of religiosity in which the value of sacrifice yields space in favor of well-being and in which religious practices are practices for the realization of desires towards self-improvement here and now. Thus, what we have seen as “immanentization” of the sacred coincides at the

same time with certain modulations of contemporary individualism and its connections with consumption. In this way, it is impossible to separate an analysis of these transformations of contemporary religiosity from broader processes that exceed the strictly religious, which implies attending to the religious in its double aspect of cause and consequence of social and cultural transformations beyond the religious.

But at the same time, there is a second dimension that must be recognized in this spread of New Age imaginary. The expansion of these discourses enters diverse feedback relationships with several realms not strictly considered as being “religious” in the most conventional analyses: cultural industry and the public space. In it emerge subjects constituted by these discourses that are capable of versioning them and then boosting them to a broader radius through diverse cultural products that also imply an approximation of New Age beliefs to Catholicism and to Christianity in general.

Claudio María Domínguez: Spirituality and Cultural Industry

The case of Claudio María Domínguez is interesting in helping us to understand a new stage in New Age spirituality: the sheer numbers that he musters with his dialogs through mass communication devices (Semán and Battaglia 2012; Semán and Rizo 2013), and what can be conceived as his adaptation to a sensitivity, in which Catholicism is a legitimate vehicle of religiosity.

Claudio María Domínguez, social communicator and author of spiritual best sellers, does not present himself as a spiritual leader, a bearer of a specific message or a new technique, but just as a privileged mediator. However, like many other readers and consumers of emerging spiritualities, he appropriates the message, sometimes embodying it with superior efficacy to that of the teachers themselves and generating a space of specific dialog in which he benefits from the crossing of legitimacies that he invokes. On the other hand, and also developing an aspect that is inherent to New Age spirituality, he defines the teachings of both masters and himself as a path that should lead a practitioner to teach and guide himself and from himself.

The spiritual production of Claudio María Domínguez has two references that we would like to emphasize. The dialog between mass media rhetoric and esthetics and the specific relationship with Catholicism as a legitimate and strongly present sensitivity in the public sphere, which are the two topics we shall discuss next.

Media Leaderships

One of the most remarkable inputs in constructing Claudio María Domínguez’s spiritual leadership is the spiritual reuse of a varied and long-lasting experience of television. Contrary to what happens with certain spiritual leaders who often brilliantly adapt to the medium, the case we are discussing builds his spiritual leadership after his presence in the media, while not resorting to them as a strategy that complements a prior development. A series of skills and operations go to make up the specificity and novelty of leadership. First of all, the recourse to the audience’s television memory to locate his personality in the past and give testimony, by contrast, of his present.

Before becoming a spiritual leader Domínguez was a mass media habitué. Four decades ago as a child star in a quiz show, and two decades ago as a scriptwriter of a

series that drew attention for the way in which it exposed eroticism. As in the case of the Pentecostal testimony, change is the important thing and not the original and perennial holiness: he who was on the wrong path and now walks on the good path is the one who can validate a method or a spiritual perspective.

Secondly, the construction of a high-profile television personality: Claudio María Domínguez does not seem in any way to be a religious person who, like those of some evangelical churches, efficiently pays for his television time. He has inhabited those spaces with great self-control since before his “conversion.” He manages radio and television times with utmost skill, ensuring maximum attention by combining long and short times, by permanently keeping hotspots of attraction, by operating the passages from serious topics to “light” themes while cultivating humor, irony, and making explicit the implicit codes of the media.

He also creates a sense of playfulness by constantly challenging his audience, making the spiritual dimension appear in the most unexpected time or theme. In this field, the humorous self-reference is exemplary: the affirmation of the most diverse spiritual possibilities is accompanied by the irony that any skeptic could make about those same affirmations of religious and/or spiritual content. The believer’s position is especially self-caricatured as well as that of the one who bored his audience with common places, the naïve, or even the contradictory and clumsy: the one who, resorting to slang but also increasingly to television, is the “boludo,” the idiot.

But thirdly, and much more importantly, he uses some of the esthetics and rhetoric of these media, such as a format that is accompanied by the showing of a passage that can be exemplary for those listeners who can relate to it: they lead to holiness (a special type of holiness), typical trajectories of the middle classes both in events and in narratives. The exhibition of privacy, the intimacy modulated in the key of individual desires (beyond the family papers and the obligations imposed on the individuals that in those cases are *son, father, or mother*), and the laid-back language, stripped of any theological formalism beyond the forms of reflection, are part of that arsenal of resources shared with television animators and media psychological counselors. This element seems rather obvious but it is not: to strip mystery from widespread mystical and therapeutic reasoning seems obvious to the middle classes that were the initial public of the New Age and for whom this language is available on a daily basis. But, on the other hand, it is neither obvious nor easy for publics who come from other traditions and competences and relate to Domínguez and other mediators as if they were teachers. In this radius of mass, these concepts must still be introduced and discussed and then the tasks of our reference communicator become significant and important. In addition to this, the pedagogical value of straightforward dialogs affirming the critical distance with respect to the gurus of naive providentialism (those of the sudden miracle, or those of the spectacular transformation of the objective conditions of action) and the description of interior knowledge as a gateway to truly miraculous powers (a miracle that is constructed as work that changes subjective conditions through an effort which, either gradually or suddenly, is reflective).

Relationship with Catholicism

One of the key points of this spiritual leader’s activity lies in the production of a literature that in general terms we understand as “self-help.” But we should note that this production has a particularity in its relationship with Catholicism.

New Age spirituality is leveraged in an “it is said” that refers to consecrated authors who do not pose any conflict of authorship, competence, or hierarchy in claiming that word. Free interpretation is the rule, but unlike what happened with Protestantism, this is not a controversial claim against a tradition that called for institutional mediation but an activity increasingly given as possible and legitimate in advance. Thus, Claudio María Domínguez has sufficient scope to define the orientation of an activity in which an ordinary man emerges who does not vindicate his gifts but accumulated experiences and the possibility of acting before any daily circumstance in a spiritually correct or admissible way. The point is how this activity is carried out in a society in which Catholicism, even without an overwhelming hegemony, as we have suggested from the beginning, not only has great symbolic weight but also exerts certain possibilities of censorship while religious diversity in active public space reflects the sanction of a tacit alliance between sectors of anti-colonialist opinion and almost nineteenth-century secularist orientations that are atomized but are still active in certain institutions of public opinion.

In our interpretation, Claudio María Domínguez deals with that circumstance by dialectizing his version of New Age religiosity in a way that contains Catholicism in several ways. In his case, the references lie explicitly and proudly between points that in the past would have been impossible to conjugate or, at least, would have been distant. Mother Teresa of Calcutta bears an aura of austerity and commitment, as does Sai Baba, who in the imaginary of many of his followers is praised for a relationship with wealth as reflected in the spectacular materializations attributed to him. And similarly, it happens if on the one hand he invokes Osho and a certain possibility of festive transgression and on the other he seeks refuge in the figure of Jesus while recovering traditional morals.

Now, the axis on which he aligns his interpretation and compatibility of reference figures of spiritual life is a common sense that is closer to the New Age than to that of Catholicism itself, but it legitimizes the position in Christian and Catholic figures. Thus, in one of his best-selling books, he affirms that the central point of spiritual life is the law of karma, the idea that everything returns, an idea which Catholicism would prefer to cover up in its interpretation. However, immediately after that claim, Domínguez tells us that in fact “the divine master of Nazareth” no less had said what was later forgotten: “he who sows, harvests”, which in his reading contains the possibility of the principle of karma.

Regarding consumerism, Domínguez solves the dilemma with a generic and ambiguous formula that can legitimize a consumerist as well as an anti-consumerist lifestyle but he clearly makes the same composition as in the previous point. For a conclusion not aligned with Catholicism, he uses a figure facing Catholics and Evangelists in which the key is to try to coexist in equilibrium between this world without being part of it: so we will be told: “as Jesus said: be of this world but do not belong to it”.

Domínguez also goes further as he makes, from his point of view, a characterization of Pope Francis I. His hierarchy is recognized, but within the framework of a cosmology that understands that all are good “spiritual seekers” and not necessarily and/or exclusively Catholics. The Pope is reclaimed insofar as he can promote spiritual attitudes whose correction is defined according to more generic parameters than those of Catholicism or Christianity itself. Both the form of the expression and the characterization of the kind of good that the Pope can do make clear the position through

which Domínguez includes a wider spirituality than Catholicism when he states his version of the good the Pope can do: “What this wonderfully well-intentioned good man can do is touch the hearts of millions of people, who can change their lives and put aside fanaticisms, and start respecting the religions of others. Because what he is teaching is that we all have the same God, beyond religions.”

This way of weaving traditions is not exclusive but is expressive of a trend that can be seen in spiritual leadership of an invoice similar to that of Domínguez. Ari Paluch, another author of spiritual best sellers who was trained in the media, outside of any spirituality, although he also assumed a shift like that of Domínguez, converges in that intersection in which the legitimacy of Catholicism is reused and inverted in versions of New Age spirituality and its massive rise. Bernardo Stamateas takes an opposite path, but he also illustrates the density of that intersection that also includes Evangelical Christianity. This pastor who was originally a Baptist opens up, by defending psychology, to all the truths of the New Era: this is, that blessings arise from a reflective exercise of re-habituating that leads one to discover one’s own powers and implications. So Domínguez’s path moves through a dense area visited by other agents who take part in or pass through New Age ideas, showing that the intersection between Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular and the New Age is a rich basin that they need to use. A plethora of references to Christianity seems to be the way in which New Age interpretive frameworks are transformed to spread in a country where Catholicism is a necessary reference of religion, without being monolithically homogenous and legitimate.

From this point of view, we can effectively move beyond a series of analogies that were deliberately provisional: apostolate and conversion are concepts that describe the role of Domínguez through the analogy between religion (Catholicism, rather) and the Bible on one hand and New Age self-help literature on the other.

Beyond the analogy, pointing out the character of a prosumer, that is, those who are both and at the same time users and producers of religious or spiritual goods, allows us to interrogate the specificity of the agency that is established. Unlike that of the Catholic cleric, the latter needs no ordainment but rather positive references from peers, followers, renowned individuals, and network backups (and not a vertical, millimetric promotion scale).

The Art of Living: Spirituality in the Public Space

Another example that is relevant in understanding the presence of New Age spirituality in areas that are not strictly spiritual or religious is the great visibility acquired by certain practices and discourses linked to the Art of Living Foundation, led in Argentina by Indian guru Sri Ravi Shankar.

The movement had a moment of great visibility during the last decade. Its highpoint came during Ravi Shankar’s visit to Buenos Aires, which brought together more than 250,000 people in one of the largest public parks of the city, making it one of the most important mass events dedicated to meditation, yoga, and personal transformation in Argentina (Vargas and Viotti 2013). This collective ritual, held every year with variable social congregations under the slogan of “Argentina Medita” (Argentina Meditates), constitutes a representative example of a new link with the public space, classically relegated to Catholicism and more recently to evangelical groups. One of the features of

this process is the non-vindication of these activities as religious, but as spiritual events aimed at personal growth and improvement. If on the one hand this guarantees a certain public efficacy—since it avoids the conflict encountered by minority religious practices in a public space dominated by Catholicism and a secular regime—on the other hand, it is important to emphasize that this resource is not the result of an accommodation strategy in the “field” but the result of a socio-cosmological regime that, understood in its own terms, lives outside ecclesial logic and the monotheisms with which they identify the religious, and therefore in an interstitial space dedicated to personal well-being under the image of an expanded and relational conception of the individual.

At the same time, and like other experiences such as that of Claudio María Domínguez mentioned above, *The Art of Living* means a use of mass media and of the cultural industry that would have been unthinkable in the alternative manifestations of Orientalist spirituality of the 1970s and 1980s. The Foundation has an editorial and a distribution system for the texts written by Ravi Shankar, or even by members of the foundation who, in an autobiographical tone, relate their experiences, resulting in copious material present in the “spirituality and self-help” sections of any local bookstore. The editorial world is joined by a strong mass media presence favored by the movement’s recruitment system, which includes among its supporters journalists, media agents, and news producers of the media system. During Ravi Shankar’s visit in 2012, the media gave a positive and apologetic look, in appreciation of the work of personal change and secular spirituality. This contrasted with the way in which alternative non-Catholic spiritual practices had, in the past decades, identified with the “problem of sects” and with spurious interests, manipulation, “brainwashing,” and the illegal practice of medicine (Viotti 2015). If on the one hand this relatively beneficial treatment in the media accounts for a transformation in the public image of these practices, at the same time, it shows the incorporation of ways of mediation linked to the media and the publishing industry, which is a new chapter in the ways in which New Age spirituality is related to materiality and, in turn, to the public sphere and the market.

The activities carried out by the Foundation during the first decades of the millennium summarize what we could call a new sensibility in relation to New Age spirituality. A new sensibility that came out of the private workshops or therapeutic practices with which some of the spiritual practices had been identified since the 1980s, and extended into a much wider social network that includes the public space and the media, but also business areas and different public management institutions such as prisons, schools, or hospitals. This is due to different factors. In the first place, there is a growing social demand for alternative and spiritual resources that is evident in the younger generations above all. Secondly, there is a specificity of the movement itself that possesses a capacity to offer a series of techniques and experiences with a high degree of efficiency and an enormous recruitment ability among a population group historically excluded from alternative practices.

Between Catholicism and Psychotherapy

The *Art of Living* movement has various premises distributed throughout the main urban centers of Argentina. They offer workshops and courses dedicated to personal improvement such as meditation, yoga, or healthy eating. The courses usually feature motivational talks, with the instructors defining themselves as “mediators” for the personal discovery of the followers, and with meditation and breathing techniques

designed to achieve experiences of strong commotion in a short time and without too much training. The language of energy and balance traverses those experiences designed for a public not initiated in similar practices, which produces a recruitment effect in areas such as companies, workplaces, or in family and friendship networks themselves, which are not strictly part of the alternative network.

Those who participate in the activities of the Foundation, as well as many others who circulate through alternative spirituality networks and spaces, describe diverse and heterogeneous trajectories that account for a diversity of experiences and of religious, spiritual, and psychologized identifications. Although in many cases, especially among the most involved or those who actively participated in the core of the organization, there is a closeness to a Westernized Hindu ideology. In most people, we contacted there is a generic sensitivity linked to an alternative spirituality that is understood as a quest along diverse paths and that is based on (a) a grammar of “energy” as a force that is the cause and the source of well-being and (b) a conception of subjectivity that supposes an “expanded I,” above its natural, social, and spiritual surroundings.

That common grammar allows transits and diverse identifications as well as new claims of old religious experiences now revitalized in a new key. Among the frequent visitors, we find a good number of people who identify themselves as traditional Catholics and who have moved away from the “faith” because they consider it to be associated with a cold institution. However, in many cases, the intense spiritual sensitivity and a generic conception of divinity offered by the Foundation allows them to rediscover Catholicism in another way, vindicating new ways of living it and bringing these experiences closer to a more vivid Catholic spirituality. In the meditation sessions, and in some of the visualizations prompted there, it is not uncommon to find people who have had visions of the Virgin Mary, or those who associate them with some intense corporal experience or religious feelings already experienced in Catholic contexts. Although to a lesser degree, the same can be said of some participants who referred to an inherited Jewish religiosity cultivated in childhood which at a certain time in their lives became diluted but was reappraised from a new way of experiencing the divinity prompted by the Art of Living courses.

A final aspect has to do with the articulation of spiritual experiences and attention and consultation in the vast field of psychological resources in urban areas in Argentina. Among the students, it is very common to find experiences of psychoanalytic attention, which can complement spiritual pursuits in the Art of Living or be experienced as partial and then rejected with the acceptance of more “holistic” offers. Simultaneously, there are psychological resources that are not strictly psychoanalytic, especially of systemic or cognitive inspiration, that are complemented and that produce a semantic space related to spirituality. Among the followers, it is common for spiritual searches to be articulated with other opportunities and personal growth practices in a sinuous horizon between the spiritual and the psychological, such as family constellations or certain Jungian-inspired psychotherapies, or with more strictly secular plans, but with a relational matrix, emphasizing on the body and emotions, such as group therapy.

Conclusion

The so-called New Age-style spirituality in Argentina does not emerge exclusively as a process of recent transnationalization, but it establishes previous links with the non-

Catholic religiosity of the first decades of the twentieth century and, later, the processes of diffusion of spiritual resources initiated in 1960s counterculture. This does not mean that, on the other hand, they suppose pure continuity with those previous moments. In fact, at the same time, it incorporates contemporary elements, similar to those that can be found in other Western social spaces, and is part of a double process of religious diversification in the public sphere and reconfiguration of the typical subjectivation modes of the last decades. On the other hand, and this is significant, it has a massive scope, both in its media range and in the cultural industry as well as in public and institutional spaces, classically shared between Roman Catholicism or the secular world.

In tension with analyses that would suppose pure continuity with previous spiritual configurations, and arguments that only want to see a genesis that goes back to the conformation of a more or less stable “peripheral religious modernity” in the urban space, we insist on the importance of registering cultural and religious discontinuity processes that can call attention to contemporary mutations that modulate both the mediation forms with the sacred and the processes of subjectivation articulated with them.

In turn, there is another epistemological consequence of this whole process. The unfolding of New Age spirituality in Argentina, visibly in its mass stage, implies the development of new leadership, contents, and religious formats, which necessarily entail a redefinition of “religious field” divisions, as an approach that benefits “groups,” especially their official and public discourse, and political negotiations for “religious goods.” This is in addition to promoting a rethinking of the very borders between “culture” and “religion.”

As already suggested, mediations between subjects and non-human agencies, as well as the production of subjectivities over legitimate or illegitimate positions of religious groups and their periphery or centrality in relation to Catholicism (or even with secularism) can be a resource that, without denying disputes over legitimacy, opens a field of possibilities for the analysis of religion beyond its established logics.

The growth of this New Age-style spirituality by diffusion without centralization or unique formats becomes the object of appropriations and recreations that do not form a distinctly different religious segment from others. By its own subjectivity factory, promoter of the most diverse compatibilization forms, it operates by including other religious principles or by making other religious institutions able to introduce New Age principles into its ideology and rituals. In addition, it permeates the so-called religious field with its principles, and rather than producing different and competitive grouping, it crosses existing religious ideologies regarding the experiences and representations of the believers: it does not offer a new form to solve the relationships between body and soul, forcing a change in religious affiliation but, for example, it questions that division of reality at a time when many contemporary societies are also questioning it.

This leads to a second question. New Age spirituality not only implies a change in frontiers and the logics of internal division in the religious field, but also a redirection of the religious to its emergency plan, at the crossroads between the social and the cultural (and everything political entailed in these dimensions).

As recently suggested by Alejandro Frigerio (Frigerio 2016, 2018, p. 70), but also by other authors focusing on Europe, such as Altglas (2016) and Wood (2010), or Bender and Mcroberts (2012) in the USA, New Age spirituality, and possibly spirituality in general, questions our academic inertia in defining “religion.” In fact, that definition of religion tends to prioritize systematical beliefs

often based on a text or a more or less coherent system, and a definition of the institutional that, from the Christian matrix which supports it, associates it either with the church-type hierarchical form or with its counterpart: the personal mystical experience. The Argentine example of New Age spirituality, which we just outlined here, shows morphologies that cannot be remitted either to the church, to the sect, or to pure mystical experience. Their modes of mediation and circulation vary. In addition to the workshops and personal practices, books, television programs, and mass events are also included, composing a vast network of transfer and recreation of a sensitivity that, in turn, can never be reduced only to a therapeutic technique, a spiritual movement, or even to an isolated pure individual experience. On the other hand, this social network is, at the same time, a mediation network with supra-human technologies and resources experienced as forces that explain suffering and well-being in a non-naturalistic way. This assemblage of people, things, and unintentional forces, modulated in the language of “energy,” does not cease to mobilize Catholicism or the secular horizon of old and new psychological knowledge. While these two elements have identified Argentine specificity, or at least that of its most legitimate sectors, it is also true that those traditions do not imply pure continuity; they reveal mutations and contemporary transformations. The New Age network is partially connected with charismatic-style spiritualized Catholicism or with post-psychological knowledge and techniques more inspired by cognitive or systemic models than by traditional psychoanalysis.

This can be mapped with the slant that Pierre Bourdieu proposed regarding his own notion of “religious field.” It was the sociologist himself who raised the need to warn that his more abstract conception of “religious field” was tainted by French and European historicity in general, and even by the views that certain actors could have of him. Thus, during the 1980s, Bourdieu claimed that part of the definitions that inspired his own about the “genesis and structure of the religious field” during the early 1970s were “unconsciously universalized” definitions and were not “fit but for a historical state of the field,” a state in which the religious field was reduced to the dispute between Catholicism and Protestantism as competing versions for the “curing of souls” (Bourdieu 1985, p. 103). This implies understanding that defining the goods of the religious field as “salvation” goods, and the dispute over them as a monopoly on their legitimate offer, leads to an excessive focus on the institutionalized definitions of religion as Catholicism and Protestantism.

In this new scenario, it is not only different formulas to understand the Eucharist or administer salvation that compete but professionals of psychosomatic healing, for example. It confronts conceptions that hold salvation to be a religious good, but also health, prosperity, etc. In the “heterogenized” religious space, and not only contemporaneously, the consolation of the cross, the promise of healing, the interior searches through diet and breathing exercises (that is, religions that affirm the existence of something like the spiritual, and others that reject that category or, at least, the way of distinguishing it from the physical and the psychological) enter the competition. Religion is a field of dispute in which not only definitions of religion are underpinned, expressed, and reinforced but mostly notions of person, health, and disease of which religions are a co-participating element.

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