REVOLUTIONARY IMPLICATIONS
FOR RELIGIOUS COMPETITION
FROM BRAZIL’S ESOTERIC BOOM

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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PHENOMENON

Two tiny shops tucked away amidst the teeming commerce of Madureira, one of the major commercial districts in Rio de Janeiro’s North Zone, provide an unexpected yet revealing glimpse of the extent to which alternative spiritualities have established themselves during the past decade or so as a force to be reckoned with in Brazil’s vibrant, kaleidoscopic religious marketplace. The element of surprise stems from the fact that Madureira, a district where the commerce has traditionally catered more to the tastes of the lower-middle and working classes, does not conjure up the conventional profile of an urban district in Brazil likely to attract the kind of people who are most inclined to seek out the experiences and orientation typically associated with “alternative spiritualities.” Prior to my informing the reader exactly how the two stores in Madureira are tied in with alternative spiritualities, however, it is important first to delineate the category “alternative spiritualities” within the context of the contemporary Brazilian religious marketplace, at least insofar as its composition and boundaries are concerned.

“Alternative Spiritualities” as a Distinct Category within Brazil’s Religious Marketplace

Alternative spiritualities in Brazil today derive neither from a single religious tradition, such as Catholicism, Protestantism, or Kardecist Spiritism, nor from any particular cluster of traditions marked by a common cultural or geographical origin, such as Afro-Brazilian traditions. Alternative spiritualities comprise instead an eclectic montage of religious teachings and practices drawn mainly from a variety of non-Latin American sources. Some of the principal sources are major historical Eastern religious traditions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Daoism. Other influential sources are either more recent in origin or simply more obscure, such as Japanese New Religions, Theosophy and its offshoots, and numerous other metaphysical, occult, and spiritualist traditions (cf. Carvalho 1992 and 1994; Clarke 1994 and 1995; Carpenter and Roof 1995).

The alternative spiritualities category also encompasses a broad array of beliefs and practices related to physical, psychological, and emotional aspects of healing, and to holistic and
ecological concerns, as well (Brandão and Crema 1991; Russo 1993). Miscellaneous divinatory techniques are also included, ranging from several distinct astrological, Tarot, and kabbalistic systems to the Chinese *I Ching* and Scandinavian runes. To a lesser extent, elements from traditions with deep roots in Latin America, such as indigenous shamanism or Afro-Brazilian traditions, are also incorporated. A seminal article by anthropologist and political scientist Luiz Eduardo Soares, the title of which translates into English as “Religious by Nature: Alternative Culture and Ecological Mysticism in Brazil” (1989b), identifies a *body-spirit-nature* thematic triad at the heart of the intricate web of alternative spiritualities, with the concept of *energy* functioning as the “cultural currency” that links all the disparate strands together (124-25, 129). Other salient features of alternative spiritualities in Brazil, according to Soares, include a holistic outlook on the cosmos (126-27), use of the term “work” to characterize human agency in such areas as ritual and spiritual disciplines (130-33), a strong preference for feminine imagery associated with ecological mysticism (134-35), and a recurrent quest motif (137-38).

Taking the various elements cited into account, I propose the following working definition for alternative spiritualities as a discrete category existing within the highly diversified Brazilian religious marketplace:

*a diverse array of beliefs, practices, and positions on societal issues, which are deemed by their adherents to contribute towards bringing about “spiritual” transformation at both the individual and the planetary levels, in deliberate contradistinction to the teachings and practices of the predominant religious tradition or traditions within the immediate cultural sphere of reference.*

In accordance with this definition, I exclude Catholicism, Afro-Brazilian traditions, traditional Protestantism, Pentecostalism, Kardecist Spiritism, and Umbanda from the alternative spiritualities category, at least at the aggregate level. Even as I do so, however, I acknowledge the truth of Carlos Rodrigues Brandão’s assertion that the overall “spectrum of Brazilian spirituality consists of many themes that are separated by permeable membranes, rather than rigid, static compartments” (Brandão 1993: 437). This porous quality of the boundaries between religious
traditions in Brazil—certain notorious exceptions notwithstanding—is reflected in those examples cited in this paper in which unmistakable echoes of alternative spiritualities crop up within Catholic, liberal Protestant, or Afro-Brazilian spheres of influence.

This paper examines some of the complex dynamics involved in the ongoing proliferation of alternative spiritualities in Brazil, with an emphasis upon the broader significance of their growing presence in the country’s cultural marketplace. Over the course of the past decade, promoters of alternative spiritualities have proven to be quite adept at “retailing” their respective alternative spirituality “product lines.” Often this has meant spanning boundaries of various sorts in order to forge collaborative relationships with representatives of such cultural institutions as the publishing industry and the mass media.

The overall result has been an appreciable increase in that which I designate as the sociocultural leverage redounding to the benefit of the promoters of alternative spiritualities. What I mean here is that, not only have alternative spiritualities grown in their capacity to compete with more established religious traditions for followers, but they have also seen their

1 Boundary disputes in Brazil’s religious marketplace today tend to be concentrated along the interfaces between certain traditions, such as between Pentecostalism and Afro-Brazilian traditions (cf. Soares 1993) and between Umbanda and Kardecist Spiritism (cf. Hess 1991: 154-68).

2 This is an interpretive concept of my own devising, which refers to any type of advantage accruing to an entity, group or network as the result of an application of cultural resources which are not under the beneficiary’s control (hence, the aspect of leverage). Sociocultural leverage may be generated by the beneficiary’s shrewd mobilization of such strategic outside resources as skilled personnel, distribution networks, technical equipment, financial investments, etcetera, or it may not involve any initiative from the beneficiary at all.

The advantages redounding to the beneficiary entity may be of different types. They could be financial in nature, as in increased sales, fee receipts, or donations. They might take the form of increased numbers of outside participants in the beneficiary’s programs and activities or simply a higher public profile, an improved public image, or alliances with other groups in society regarding issues of special interest. While any religious group can potentially make use of sociocultural leverage, it is those groups with the fewest cultural and material resources of their own, such as more recent market entrants, which are in a position to derive the greatest proportional benefit.

The concept of sociocultural leverage that I am proposing deals with a type of dynamics that is typically associated with Resource Mobilization theory, a body of thought concerned with analyzing how social movements coopt outside resources, not only from institutional agencies but also from so-called “conscience constituencies” (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Jenkins 1983). My principal innovative contribution in introducing the concept of sociocultural leverage, besides the application of Resource Mobilization principles to the religious marketplace, is to take seriously such intangible considerations as public image and reputation as areas in which gains may be realized.
influence upon the culture at large expand to a level utterly out of proportion to the size of their still relatively minuscule number of committed practitioners. In so doing, alternative spiritualities have effectively indicated that new, emergent methods of competition are in the offing within the Brazilian religious marketplace, methods that are perhaps singularly attuned to widespread cultural assumptions in the society at the end of the twentieth century.

A Revolutionary Impact upon Competitive Dynamics in Brazil’s New Religious Marketplace

As I have already indicated, the dynamic growth attained by alternative spiritualities in Brazil to date can largely be attributed to modes of propagation which have little in common with the street-corner preaching, daily storefront healing services, processions, or massive stadium rallies that have all typically been associated with the country’s more conspicuous religious traditions. Proponents of alternative spiritualities are much more apt to rely instead upon the sale and distribution of literature that is nonsectarian in its appeal, perhaps in conjunction with the offering of courses, workshops, and seminars which are open to the public—sometimes at no charge but most often on a fee-for-service basis. What this approach represents, of course, is the adaptation to a Latin American cultural and economic context of a market-oriented approach to spirituality that emerged originally in North American and European cultural settings. This orientation is part and parcel of that particular religiocultural phenomenon which British sociologist Colin Campbell refers to as the *cultic milieu* and which is especially noteworthy for fostering spiritual seekership in modern society.³

The relative success enjoyed by alternative spiritualities on the basis of these initiatives has potentially far-reaching implications for the manner in which religious competition will be waged throughout all of urban Latin Americaduring the coming years. The innovative ways in which alternative spiritualities are promoted to the public at large inevitably contribute to the formation of new patterns and mazeways in this field of endeavor. While proponents of alternative

³ See footnote number 9.
spiritualities in Brazil are building upon existing religious and cultural trends within their own society in devising their methods of propagation, those methods of propagation, in turn, are already beginning to affect more established religious traditions, in the sense of modifying ever so subtly the ways in which traditions in and around the religious mainstream are portrayed to the general public. Such changes stem in part from the mounting pressures on leaders and strategists throughout the religious marketplace to adapt to the region’s changing sociocultural milieu, under the impact of rising levels of urbanization, mass media influence, educational attainment, and globalization.

In a cultural environment that is undergoing such rapid and wholesale transformation, it is hardly surprising that conventional approaches to the propagation of particular religious messages and teachings may be losing some of their efficacy. No matter how well such approaches may have served different religious bodies in Latin America in the past, one cannot simply presume that tried-and-true methods of catechizing, evangelizing, missionizing, and/or proselytizing will indefinitely retain their capacity for eliciting desired responses from target audiences. This is why it is so important to recognize and understand the sociocultural dynamics undergirding the current expansion of alternative spiritualities as comprising the newest sector of the Brazilian religious marketplace. While certain aspects of the growth dynamics of alternative spiritualities in Brazil constitute a continuation of historical patterns, many of the ways in which proponents of such traditions have collaborated with representatives of the cultural industries have proved to be quite novel indeed. The results attained through this type of collaboration have inspired emulation on the part of proponents of other religious traditions, in the sense that they have experimented with similar approaches in the task of acquainting the general public with their respective contributions to the country’s overall religious mosaic.

The aforementioned identification of alternative spiritualities with the cultic milieux of North America and western Europe would lead one to expect a marked elective affinity between
alternative spiritualities and the upper-middle and more affluent classes in Brazilian society. Indeed, exactly such an elective affinity is mirrored in the specialized monthly newspapers which target alternative spirituality aficionados in Greater Rio de Janeiro. Each issue of such newspapers generally carries dozens of advertisements for a wide variety of bookstores, study centers, holistic institutes, and shops, ads which often specify the types of products, services, lectures, seminars, or courses that are being offered. In addition, these papers publish schedules of those upcoming events that their editors deem to be of special interest to a readership attuned to alternative spiritualities, including lectures, courses, and seminars across a broad range of topics in such general areas as natural therapies, forms of divination, magical practices, parapsychology, and the control of spiritual energies.

Predictably, the addresses listed in the advertisements and notices contained therein are located for the most part in districts in which the commerce is geared predominantly towards upscale consumers. Representing the city’s South Zone, where the proximity of the famed Carioca beaches results in some of the most expensive real estate prices in all of Brazil, districts such as Barra de Tijuca, Gávea, Leblon, Ipanema, Copacabana, Botafogo, and Laranjeiras show

4 Citing the situation in Brazil as an example of the growing popularity of alternative spiritualities throughout Latin America, Chilean sociologist Cristián Parker acknowledges their elective affinity with the “nonpopular” (his term) population segments:

The various centers, associations, courses, events, and initiatives—for example, yoga, acupuncture, naturism, meditation, the astral map, and Taoism—inspired by these ‘new age’ currents seem to flourish preponderantly in certain middle-class groups and among segments of the population, especially youth, having more formal schooling (Parker 1996: 158).

5 Such publications tend to suffer a fairly high turnover rate. It is difficult for an individual newspaper to survive financially in this specialized market niche. Others soon rise to take the place of the casualties, however. For example, during my first trip to Brazil on this project in 1995, the monthly newspaper *Religare* ceased publication after twenty issues dating back over the previous two years. At the time this left *Ganesh* (named after the Hindu elephant deity) and *Alvorecer* (The Dawning) as the principal monthly newspapers of a more general nature in circulation within the alternative cultic milieu in Greater Rio de Janeiro. *Quiron* (named after Chiron, the wise Greek centaur) from Belo Horizonte was also available at some newsstands, while a couple of other small esoteric newssheets could be picked up at some alternative shops.

6 Books by both Brazilian and non-Brazilian authors are listed. Products range from figurines of angels and gnomes, to crystals and pyramids, to floral essences. Services include diverse massage and body work techniques, psychotherapeutic approaches, and divinatory methods. Instruction is offered across a full gamut of esoteric subject matter, spanning both Oriental and Western esoteric traditions.
up repeatedly in the ads. Tijuca and Méier, two of the more prestigious districts in the North Zone, are also well represented in the advertising for goods and services linked to alternative spiritualities.

This brings us back to our initial query: why Madureira? When books, artwork, and other commodities associated with alternative spiritualities begin appearing in display windows and on store shelves in a part of the city not traditionally frequented by the middle class or the elite, there is occasion for some raised eyebrows, at the very least. Admittedly, the two cases recounted below in this first segment of the paper differ somewhat from each other in terms of the precise constituencies that they represent. Nevertheless, they both clearly testify to the spread of alternative spiritualities in unexpected directions, traversing socioeconomic boundaries which are effectively inscribed onto the map of Rio de Janeiro. Further on in this paper I will cite some examples of alternative spiritualities crossing boundaries of a different sort, such as the boundaries which are inscribed onto the complex, varicolored mosaic that comprises Brazilian religious literature.

A Tale of Two Cubicles

Only a ten- to fifteen-minute walk separates the two aforementioned shops. Tellingly enough, however, that walk includes a pedestrian bridge which spans multiple tracks of a major commuter train line linking the heart of the metropolis that is Rio de Janeiro to the outlying working-class districts. As is often the case in urban Brazil, a comparatively short spatial distance can effectively translate into a disproportionately great socioeconomic distance.

Indeed, this is the case with Madureira’s commercial center. Commerce on the north side of the railroad tracks bears a certain resemblance to that of the Baixada Fluminense, the lowlands where several of Greater Rio de Janeiro’s most populous working-class bedroom communities are located. Indeed, commerce north of the tracks is geared toward a decidedly working-class clientele. Vendors hawk comparatively inexpensive items from ramshackle booths or tables on the crowded sidewalks to in front of dusty, low-rise commercial buildings crammed with shops. Shop
A is located in the basement of one of these buildings, which functions as a tiered marketplace. Amid stores selling bulk food staples and several shops selling the implements that are customarily used in performing the rituals of Candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian traditions, Shop A literally has one foot squarely in the Afro-Brazilian camp and the other squarely in the camp of alternative spiritualities; its floor and shelf space are neatly divided down the middle. A potential customer entering the store finds the left half of the small enclosure devoted to the images, figurines, incense powders, and other accessories associated with the *culto Afro*. Meanwhile, the right half of the cubicle contains pyramids, crystals, gnomes, and other assorted commodities which cater to practitioners of alternative spiritualities. When questioned, the salesman attending to customers on both sides of the shop opines that the right side of the store attracts more customers than the left side.  

Shop B is situated across the tracks from Shop A, in more ways than one. It occupies a tiny, glass-fronted cubicle on the second floor of a recently remodeled low-rise commercial building amidst name-brand clothing stores, fast-food restaurants, branches of Brazil’s largest private-sector banks, a movie theater, and a branch of one of Rio’s more prestigious English language institutes. The other stores in Shop B’s same building are relatively upscale, with bright, multicolored decor. In fact, the top-40 style Brazilian and non-Brazilian music piped throughout the building threatens to drown out the instantly recognizable Oriental strains playing inside the occupied by Shop B. The wall behind the counter inside Shop B features lithographs of Krishnamurti, the Mahareshi Mahesh Yogi, and other masters venerated by practitioners of distinct alternative spiritualities.

Pedro (a pseudonym), the owner of the shop, is an artisan who fashions many of the objects for sale himself, from items made of gemstones to tiny carved angels. He formerly was involved in a partnership in an esoteric store in Botafogo, in the South Zone, which was situated much more on the beaten path of seekers after alternative spiritualities. However, when Pedro

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7 Author’s field notes, Rio de Janeiro, May 23, 1996.
Robert T. Carpenter/Oklahoma Christian University

decided to launch out on his own, he deliberately opted for a North Zone locale, where commercial rents would be considerably more affordable. Well aware, though, of the added challenge of trying to build up a locally-based alternative spiritualities clientele in Madureira, Pedro makes a point of advertising in the monthly alternative newspaper Ganesha. He relies upon its circulation within the esoteric network throughout Greater Rio de Janeiro to enable him to attract customers from wealthier districts, where people are more accustomed to thinking in terms of alternative spiritualities.\(^8\)

In short, both of these shops in Madureira which carry merchandise related to alternative spiritualities are out of place, in a sense. At the same time, though, they stand as testimonies to the versatility and adaptability of alternative spiritualities, as demonstrated in their capacity to transcend the limits of their natural constituency under certain conditions.

THE EMERGENCE OF A BRAZILIAN CULTIC MILIEU

During the past ten to fifteen years, Brazil has witnessed the emergence of its own distinctive and vibrant version of a social scene centered upon alternative spiritualities, which many sociologists of religion who study the North American and European contexts designate as the *cultic milieu*, after Colin Campbell.\(^9\) In many of Brazil’s chief urban centers, far-flung networks have coalesced as a result of commercial and professional enterprises and outlets having sprung up to mesh with the activities of groups and communities identified with many different

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\(^8\) Interview with “Pedro” [pseudonym], author’s field notes, Rio de Janeiro, May 31, 1996.

\(^9\) The term “cultic milieu” derives from British sociologist Colin Campbell’s seminal article entitled “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization” (Campbell 1972). Campbell characterizes the cultic milieu as a specific type of cultural underground marked by militant heterodoxy and antidogmatism, internal solidarity, openness to diverse beliefs and practices, overlapping communication structures, and a pervasive seekership thrust (Campbell 1972: 122-23).

Unorthodox science, alien and heretical religion, deviant medicine, all comprise elements of such an underground. In addition, it includes the collectivities, institutions, individuals and media of communication associated with these beliefs. Substantively it includes the worlds of the occult and the magical, of spiritualism and psychic phenomena, of mysticism and new thought, of alien intelligences and lost civilizations, of faith healing and nature cure (122).
alternative spiritualities. These composite networks typically consist of bookstores, shops selling diverse accessories, holistic lecture and seminar centers, therapeutic facilities, small groups dedicated to the study and practice of specific traditions (whether separately or in combination), and even consulting firms.¹⁰

The highly eclectic nature of the networks themselves complicates the task of gauging their full scope. However, a study conducted in São Paulo a few years ago provides some insight regarding the dimensions of one particular network at the metropolitan level. In 1995 a team of anthropologists from the University of São Paulo (USP), under the direction of José Guilherme Cantor Magnani, tallied more than one thousand groups and establishments within the bounds of Greater São Paulo, Brazil’s largest metropolitan region, which claimed some type of “esoteric” (as distinct from Kardecist, Spiritist, or Afro-Brazilian) association or affiliation (Magnani 1995). My own field research in Rio de Janeiro, though far more modest in scale than the study carried out by the USP group in São Paulo, suggests that the alternative spiritualities network in the country’s second largest metropolitan region is fully comparable to the network thriving in Greater São Paulo, in terms of both its size and its diversity (cf. Heelas and Amaral 1994).

In much the same manner as occurs in other countries where cultic milieux and/or esoteric communities are flourishing, the general Brazilian public’s initial contact with networks associated with alternative spiritualities may come about in any of several ways (cf. Jorgensen 1992). Such contact may take the form of the purchase of an esoteric book or periodical, or perhaps attendance at a course or workshop of a self-help nature. Alternatively, it may involve recourse to any of innumerable therapeutic and/or divinatory approaches available through the avenue of individual network components. Regardless of the exact form assumed by the initial contact between a seeker and any component of the network, moving on to other components is a very

common occurrence, due to the “overlapping communication structures which prevail within the milieu” (Campbell 1972: 123).11

How did this Brazilian version of the cultic milieu emerge in the first place? The following capsule summary of the esoteric boom which has been underway in urban Brazilian culture since the mid-1980s conveys some sense of the impact that alternative spiritualities have had upon diverse facets of Brazil’s broader cultural marketplace.

An Overview of Brazil’s Esoteric Boom of the 1980s and 1990s

Pinpointing the beginning of the full-fledged cycle that has eventually come to be identified within the Brazilian publishing industry as the esoteric boom is not easy. 1986 marked the debut on bestseller lists of books that were classified as “esoteric,”12 although alternative spiritualities had already been encountering pockets of receptivity in major Brazilian cities prior to that time. (My own initial, unintended contacts with various manifestations of alternative spirituality occurred in 1982, while my wife and I were serving as missionaries in Brasilia.13) Three years later

11 The following description by Colin Campbell of cultic milieu dynamics is germane to the Brazilian sphere of alternative spiritualities:

More than anything else the cultic world is kept alive by the magazines, periodicals, books, pamphlets, lectures, demonstrations and informal meetings through which its beliefs and practices are discussed and disseminated. However, unlike the sectarian situation these communication media are not bounded by the framework of the beliefs of a particular collectivity but are generally open....[T]he literature of particular groups and movements frequently devotes space to topics outside its own orbit, includes reviews of one another’s literature and advertises one another’s meetings. As a direct consequence of this individuals who ‘enter’ the cultic milieu an any one point frequently travel rapidly through a wide variety of movements and beliefs and by so doing constitute yet another unifying force within the milieu (Campbell 1972: 123).

12 According to current usage in the Brazilian and Latin American literary markets, the term “esoteric” is roughly equivalent to the “New Age” category utilized in the international book trade. Even though the term is commonly used in the book trade in Brazil, and Rio de Janeiro’s influential newspaper Jornal do Brasil periodically publishes separate listings of esoteric bestsellers in its special Saturday cultural insert, it is a category that defies precise definition. My inquiries at the headquarters of Brazil’s National Book Publishers’ Guild (Sindicato Nacional de Editores de Livros) yielded no specific criteria for the category.

13 In fact, the very first contact came through my wife Donna, who enrolled in prenatal relaxation classes at a center called Rebirth, owned by a Goan who incorporated New Age-style visualization exercises into the classes he taught. Then I took a six-week orientation course on volunteer opportunities in Brazil’s Federal District, which was offered under the auspices of a Catholic parish located in one of Brasilia’s most affluent residential districts.
David J. Hess, in the course of carrying out field research on Kardecist Spiritism, was introduced to “the world of alternative Brazilian religion, science, and medicine—a Brazilian New Age which makes that of California seem bland in comparison,” (Hess 1991: 2). Hess’s comment was prompted by his attendance at the First International Congress on Alternative Therapies, which was held in Sao Paulo in 1985. He also attended a joint conference of parapsychologists and natural therapists that took place in Brasilia the same year—in Hess’s words, “[l]ess an academic conference than a gathering of Brazil’s occult and New Age tribes” (118).

Nonetheless, the first noteworthy surge in the sales of esoteric books only occurred in 1986. During the initial phase, this niche of the literary market was completely dominated by translations into Portuguese of works by such worldwide bestselling authors as Marion Zimmer Bradley and Shirley MacLaine. The popularity of these works soon attracted the attention of the country’s largest publishing houses, beset as they were at the time by prolonged doldrums in the book trade. Several publishers seized the opportunity to venture into the esoteric market niche,

The collective experience of my twenty colleagues in the course, all married women, included the study and practice of astrology, Tarot, and parapsychology, in addition to attendance at lectures sponsored by Japanese New Religions, the Rosicrucians, and different offshoots of the Theosophical Society. Moreover, one of my colleagues claimed to be a reincarnated Egyptian priestess who coauthored books with her husband, who claimed to be a reincarnated Egyptian priest.

Several other references to alternative spiritualities appear in Hess’s two books on Kardecism: Spirits and Scientists: Ideology, Spiritism, and Brazilian Culture (1991b) and Samba in the Night: Spiritism in Brazil (1994). Among those mentioned are parapsychology, Buddhism, ufology, and psychobiophysics.

A telling indication of the absolute domination of this segment of the literary market by foreign authors during the early stages of the boom can be found in an article which appeared in the May 4, 1988 issue of the Brazilian newsmagazine Veja, entitled “The Mystical Surge” [“A corrente mistica”]. A report on the unprecedented popularity of esoteric books in Brazil, the article showcases Shirley MacLaine’s autobiographical bestsellers. In a revealing detail, one of the photos accompanying the article shows a close-up view of a stack of books that can be presumed to be representative of the “esoteric” category; among the works whose titles are legible are Portuguese translations of the following: Carl Jung’s Memories, Dreams, Reflections; Fritjof Capra’s The Tao of Physics and The Turning Point; Lobsang Rampa’s The Third Vision; Joseph Murphy’s The Power of the Subconscious; Colin Wilson’s The Occult; Norman Vincent Peale’s The Power of Positive Thinking; and The Tibetan Book of the Dead —“A corrente mistica,” Veja (4 maio 1988): 140-42. The text of this article contains one citation of a rather obscure Brazilian author and makes no mention whatsoever of eventual bestselling author Paulo Coelho. The absence of Coelho’s name in this 1988 article is worth noting, considering that he was prominently featured in every Veja article from 1990 onward that touched upon any aspect of the esoteric boom. A brief research note on bestselling books in Brazil between 1980 and 1988 does not refer to the esoteric boom explicitly but does comment that Marion Zimmer Bradley had four bestsellers during the period--Sandra Reimão, “Os best-sellers no Brasil 1980/1988,” Comunicação e Sociedade, Ano X, nº 17 (agosto 1991): 57.
joining a handful of their peers who had always specialized in esoteric/occult literature. As a result, new special collections or series were inaugurated at several major publishing houses, under such titles as Enigmas of the Ages, New Age, and The Arch of Time. The key to the viability of these innovative ventures was the publishers’ hiring of consultants or acquisitions editors who were already well acquainted with Brazil’s theretofore minuscule and relatively obscure esoteric community.

A significant breakthrough occurred when Paulo Coelho, formerly a well-known, iconoclastic rock music lyricist in Brazil in the early 1970s, turned to writing popular occult fiction. His success was not immediate. In 1989, however, Coelho’s first two efforts, *Diary of a Magus* ((1987) 1995) and *The Alchemist* (1988), attained bestseller status in Brazil almost simultaneously, with *The Alchemist* eventually emerging as a bestseller in several other countries over the course of the next several years. In the face of this forceful demonstration of the commercial viability of esoteric books by Brazilian authors, several well-known general publishers assumed the risk of signing relatively unknown Brazilian esoteric authors to contracts.¹⁶

In addition to the gradual increase over time in the ratio of Brazilian authors to foreign authors, another change that occurred as the esoteric boom gathered momentum within Brazil’s literary market was the diversification of its subject matter. From its initial base of popular texts based loosely upon classical Western occult traditions, the boom rapidly expanded into other topical areas, including Oriental traditions, divinatory practices from diverse cultural heritages, the Human Potential Movement, alternative medicine, and self-help techniques.¹⁷

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¹⁶ This point draws upon an interview conducted with Socorro Pires (a pseudonym), the editor of an esoteric series at a publishing house in Rio de Janeiro. She claims that Paulo Coelho’s resounding commercial success not only encouraged his publisher, Paulo Rocco, to inaugurate the new Arch of Time series in the first place but also motivated Rocco to be more patient in awaiting a return on his investment. Though most of the authors published in the Arch of Time series to date are non-Brazilian, it does include works by relatively unknown Brazilian authors, as well. Socorro Pires (pseudonym), interview by author, tape recording, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, May 20, 1996.

The phenomenon kept rippling outward across Brazilian society and culture. Before long the esoteric literary market was receiving coverage from Brazil’s mainstream press and television networks. Prime-time television audiences were introduced to a loose assortment of esoteric teachings and practices through documentary programs and telenovelas, i.e., a variant of the soap opera genre which is quite popular throughout Latin America. In late 1986, TV Globo, the nation’s leading network, aired a dubbed version of the miniseries based on Shirley MacLaine’s runaway bestseller, *Out on a Limb*, starring MacLaine herself. A thriving body of self-help literature established itself in the literary market (Birman 1993). Mass media exposure boosted consumer demand not only for esoteric literature but also for related products and services, thereby triggering a new entrepreneurial phase of the boom. By the mid-1990s, Brazil’s chief urban centers were beginning to see the extensive networks of commercial and professional enterprises that were mentioned earlier in this paper taking shape.

The multiphased episode summarized herein represents an anomaly within the context of the Brazilian religious marketplace. Admittedly, other religious traditions in Brazil have for some time engaged in the publication of literature as well as in the production of programs for both radio and television. The difference is that this type of religious cultural production usually has occurred under the auspices of and through the agency of entities such as publishing houses and media production facilities that were clearly identified with the traditions themselves. In the case of Brazil’s esoteric boom, however, representatives of alternative spiritualities have collaborated extensively with personnel from publishing and media firms not directly associated with alternative spiritualities.

Another noteworthy aspect of this more commercial side of the esoteric boom in Brazil is that it dovetails with a growing trend in Brazilian religious culture in general. This trend is in the direction of privatization. “Privatization” as used here has nothing to do with the economy. Rather, it signifies an increased emphasis upon personal autonomy in the realm of religious belief and practice, as the individual seeker selects among the available options precisely those aspects or elements which she or he deems acceptable. The trend toward privatization in religion in Brazil
is evidenced in a shift in orientation on the part of many religious and spiritual leaders, a shift away from seeking converts or adherents in a conventional sense, and in favor of attracting readers, clients, customers, patrons, students, and seminar or workshop participants. The goal, in essence, has now become one of maximizing the number of “consumers,” of whom no lasting commitment is either demanded or expected but who nonetheless furnish the wherewithal needed, in the form of purchases of commodities or payment of registration fees or honoraria, to keep various individual entities financially viable.18

In the next section of the paper, we will see some of the ramifications of this privatizing trend in terms of the expanding presence of alternative spiritualities in Brazil’s religious marketplace.

Centrifugal Momentum of Alternative Spiritualities within the Religious Marketplace

One indication of the esoteric boom’s considerable cultural penetration in Brazil is the spread of ideas and practices associated with alternative spiritualities across the boundaries—tenuous though they may be—which delineate the various non-esoteric sectors of the country’s religious marketplace. For example, Shop A in Madureira, the one I mentioned earlier in the paper that is physically divided down the middle between Afro-Brazilian and esoteric materials, has taken out a full-page advertisement before in the supplement to one of the principal monthly newspapers in Greater Rio that is dedicated to Afro-Brazilian traditions. The ad itself prominently featured drawings of witches and gnomes, figures which, for the most part, seemed out of place amid pages upon pages of articles and advertising on different orixas, rituals, and ritual accessories associated with Candomblé. What is surprising, however, is that three other pages of

18 Gey Espinheira offers the following observation regarding the impact which this trend has had on Afro-Brazilian traditions:

The profile of poverty that was once characteristic of the Afro-Brazilian traditions has undergone a change as [these traditions] have become appealing to the middle classes, including key segments among the intelligentsia. These traditions have demonstrated ample capacity to compete in the market of symbolic goods, especially in terms of magico-religious answers to the material, spiritual, and affective problems of daily life (Espinheira 1995: 66).
the same Afro-Brazilian newspaper contained stories about esoteric crystals, angels, and gypsy astrology.\footnote{Orisas & Africanos 9:32 (n.d.), 30-33.}

Other facets of the religious publishing sector in Brazil also provide windows onto this boundary-spanning process, through the books that their editors choose for publication. The Rocco publishing house’s Arch of Time series, for example, includes works by such non-Brazilian bestselling authors as motivational speaker Marianne Williamson, ayurvedic healer Deepak Chopra, and psychotherapists M. Scott Peck and John Bradshaw. But another book in the series, *Mística e espiritualidade* (*The Mystical and Spirituality*) (Boff and Betto: 1994), is worthy of special comment here because of the identities and international celebrity of its two Brazilian Catholic authors, Leonardo Boff and Frei Betto. Boff, the renowned liberation theologian and former Franciscan friar, is best known worldwide for the nearly year-long “obedient silence” that was imposed upon him during 1985-86 as a disciplinary measure by the Vatican’s Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (cf. Cox 1988) in retaliation for his questioning of certain ecclesiastical doctrines in his book, *Church: Charism and Power* (1981). Even before Boff resigned from the priesthood and the Franciscan order in 1991, his avid interest in alternative spiritualities was readily apparent. For instance, for several years he served in the influential position of religion editor at the prestigious Catholic-owned Vozes publishing house, a position which included the task of editing the influential journal *Revista de Cultura Vozes*. One of the last issues of the journal published under his editorship, the September/October 1990 issue, features the theme “Energy and Healing,” with a drawing of Chiron the centaur displayed prominently on its cover. The contents include one article on a group identified with New Age currents and named after the centaur (Hertelendy 1990) and another article regarding the applicability of astrology to psychoanalysis (Milward 1990), both of which fit squarely within the bounds of alternative spiritualities. Frei Betto, Boff’s coauthor on the book *The Mystical and Spirituality*, is a Dominican friar who has exercised a prominent role in lay mobilization efforts at the grass-roots
level of the Catholic church since the 1960s. He is best known outside Brazil for his wide-ranging, book-length interview with Cuban Premier Fidel Castro on the topic of religion (Betto 1986).

The collaboration of these two veteran luminaries from the progressive wing of Brazilian Catholicism in writing a book about mysticism and spirituality says something about the degree to which alternative spiritualities have managed to penetrate the Brazilian religious marketplace. We might even say that this book speaks to a certain “greening” of liberation theology in recent years, at least in Brazil. Contributing alternating chapters, Boff and Betto utilize mysticism as a unifying theme to convey a post-conciliar brand of ecumenicism that is well-attuned to the boundary spanning thrust of contemporary esotericism. Both authors consistently affirm that all religious traditions are equally valid. Witness Boff’s comment on the distinctive mystical aspects of Afro-Brazilian traditions (note the resonance with Luiz Eduardo Soares’s identification of Energy as a central motif of alternative spiritualities):

The Africans have a more cosmic experience of God, linked to food, which is loaded with *axé*, the divine energy that is within everything. We Christians have something similar to *axé*: the Spirit. Everything is full of the Holy Spirit or the energies of the spirit, which corresponds more or less to their *axé* (93).

Even though this is the only book that either Boff or Frei Betto has published in the Arch of Time series, both authors have subsequently taken up more ecologically and holistically oriented themes. For example, Leonardo Boff has published a book through a non-esoteric publisher entitled *Nova era: a civilização planetária—Desafios à sociedade e ao cristianismo* (*New Age: Planetary Civilization—Challenges to Society and to Christianity*) (Boff 1994), in which he explores such topics as globalization, feminism, and the environment. Among Frei Betto’s subsequent works is one published by the same publisher as Boff’s, entitled *A obra do artista: uma visão holística do universo* (*The Work of the Artist: A Holistic Vision of the Universe*) (Betto 1995), in which he links quantum physics to the Gaia Hypothesis.

As intriguing as it is for a book co-authored by two progressive Catholics to be published in an esoteric series, even more surprising is the last book to be considered in this paper. Written by Presbyterian pastor Nehemias Marien, it was published as part of the Record publishing
house’s New Age collection under the title, *Jesus, the Light of the New Age: An Eclectic and Ecumenical Perspective on the Most Revolutionary Teacher of All* (1994). Normally one would expect to encounter references to esotericism and related concepts in works by Protestant authors strictly as part of an apologetic argument intended to refute esoteric teachings.

But this is no ordinary book from the word processor of a Protestant pastor. Pastor Marien told me that his involvement in ecumenical movements over the years had gradually led him to become more interested in the study of theosophy and of esotericism in a more general sense. In fact, the invitation for him to write and publish the book had arisen after Record’s New Age series editor had heard him speak at an esoteric conference on the new consciousness in Campina Grande, in the interior of the Northeastern state of Paraíba. 20 Marien expresses his esoteric sympathies quite openly in the book, often lauding theosophical ideas as part of his proposal for that which he calls an “Ecumenism for the Third Millennium” (a chapter title). One passage unlikely to have been well received by Marien’s ecclesiastical peers comes in his discussion of astrology. Although Marien insists that he shuns horoscopes and astral maps, he harks back to a concept from the classical Western esoteric tradition in proposing a one-to-one correspondence between the twelve signs of the Zodiac and the sons of Jacob, adding the following critical remarks:

[T]here will always be greater wisdom in astrological speculations than in the Church’s empirical theology. In short, astrosophy [sic] leads us more reliably to the revelation of the Creator of the known universe, freeing us from the tangled thicket of systematic theology (Marien 1994: 78).

Clearly, such speculation on Pastor Marien’s part should not be taken as indicative of any broad esoteric influence within Brazilian Protestantism. Still, he continues to pastor an independent Protestant church in Rio de Janeiro while maintaining an active involvement in interfaith gatherings which possess a distinctly esoteric aura. Other regular participants in such gatherings whom I interviewed, representatives of more openly esoteric segments of the cultic

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milieu, speak very highly of Pastor Marien and his contributions to the ecumenical dialogue. This is symptomatic of the extent to which spiritual exploration across nominal religious boundaries persists in Brazil. Books such as those mentioned in this last section play a vital part in the overall process.

CONCLUSION

This paper provides selected glimpses of a complex phenomenon which has only begun to draw the attention of scholars who study the variegated Brazilian religious marketplace. The natural constituency of alternative spiritualities is to be found among the middle and upper socioeconomic strata. However, because of the inherent eclecticism and individualistic emphasis that characterizes most facets of alternative spiritualities, they have demonstrated a certain capacity to confound logical expectations regarding a possibly limited appeal in a society with a socioeconomic profile such as Brazil’s.

The principal significance for Brazil’s religious marketplace as a whole that I discern in the phenomenon of the expansion of alternative spiritualities points to the onset of a “new game” within the arena of religious competition, played by new rules in new venues which reflect profound changes in contemporary society. The combined impact of the growth of the market economy, globalization, and advances in communications technology has altered the parameters within which religious competition unfolds today in Brazil, as well as elsewhere in Latin America. The proponents of alternative spiritualities, by skillfully tapping into existing resources in the culture at large, particularly in the areas of publishing and the mass media, have been able to make the playing field upon which they compete with more established traditions much more level than one would otherwise expect by enhancing their sociocultural leverage. I see signs that leaders and strategists affiliated with other religious traditions outside the sphere of alternative spiritualities have duly noted the lessons to be gained from their success and will be seeking increasingly to apply those lessons as they, too, continue the daunting task of competing in Brazil’s new religious marketplace.
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