

The “Religio-therapeutic Dimension” of *Espiritismo* in Brazil and Its Place within the Study of Religions

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Bettina E. Schmidt

Abstract

The article focuses on Brazilian spiritism (*espiritismo*) and discusses its inclusion within the study of religions. After introducing its core features, it shifts to spiritist hospitals that are common across Brazil. The third section examines the boundary of the study of religions and the problem of defining religion. It shows how the artificial divide between religion and non-religion impacts our discipline. Ultimately, it makes the case of an expansion of our area of study to reflect what people do.

Keywords: Spiritism, Brazil, study of religions, non-religion

1. Introduction

At the end of 2015 I received an email from the University of Vienna with the request to examine a Ph.D. thesis. I used to have good links to the University’s anthropology department and visited Vienna several times for conferences and other events organised by my colleagues in anthropology. The department spearheaded anthropological studies in the Caribbean in the German language for years, which helped me when I began my Ph.D. research in Puerto Rico in 1990. I set up a working group for Afro-American studies for the German anthropological association and organised meetings in collaboration with my Viennese colleagues Karl Weinhart, Werner Zips, and Manfred Kremser. Unfortunately, Manfred who was probably closest to my own research died prematurely. But very fortunately for his students, Hans Gerald Hödl took over the supervision of some of his Ph.D. students – which was the reason he approached me in 2015.

This was our first personal contact. While I knew of his research on Africa and his interest in Afro-America (I might have even been a reviewer of one of his journal articles), our paths never crossed until I was asked to assess a thesis that had started to be supervised by Manfred and resumed under Gerald. Like the Ph.D. student, I had also moved from anthropology to the study of religions. Although I still introduce myself to new students as anthropologist of religion, my personal networks shifted to colleagues in the study of religions, and I lost contact with some anthropology colleagues, including those at the University of Vienna. Of all the German-speaking colleagues in the study of religions across Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, Gerald is probably closest to my own research area, which involves the African-derived religions in the Americas – though his main interest in this respect lies more in North America.¹ As also our collaboration in a dossier on syncretism shows,² we are both interested in theory, yet not abstract but ethnographically informed theory; theory that is, one that is grounded in fieldwork experiences and does not float above and distinct from lived experiences. I did not hesitate at all therefore when Lukas Pokorny asked me to contribute to this well-deserved *Festschrift* for Gerald.

I chose for my contribution a topic close to Gerald's interest. I will focus on Brazil and recount some of my memories from my fieldwork in São Paulo. But instead of focusing on African-derived religions in Brazil, I will write about Brazilian *espiritismo*. Having derived from Kardecism, the impact of *espiritismo* can be traced in several African-derived religions, mainly but not only in Umbanda – as also pointed out by Gerald in a recent article.³ Kardecism is a distinct tradition developed in nineteenth-century France, sometimes assigned to the area of “occultism” in Western societies. It inspired the development of local hybrid traditions in some Latin American countries at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. The best-known cases are in Puerto Rico and Brazil though one can also trace Allan Kardec's (1804–1869) ideas to Argentina, Cuba, Venezuela, and other countries. I came across it in Puerto Rico where I described it as *espiritismo popular* (sometimes as *espiritismo africana*).⁴ It is highly oriented towards healing, and although most Puerto Rican *espiritistas* would not call it their religion, it can be categorised as vernacular religion or Puerto Rican spirituality.

¹ See, for instance, Hödl, *Reversed Racism*.

² Hödl/Schmidt, *From Syncretism*.

³ Hödl, *African and Amerindian Spirits*.

⁴ Schmidt, *Von Geistern*.

There are many parallels between Puerto Rican and Brazilian *espiritismo*. Both originated from Kardec's teaching and found a way to present it in line with the core ideas of Roman Catholicism; both focus on helping the living by dealing with the deceased; and both include in their bricolage elements from other traditions, such as beliefs from the indigenous population of their countries as well as from the African enslaved people. Even some ideas from other traditions, such as freemasonry and Kabbalah, made it into their bricolage.

Despite similar roots, there is, however, a difference between Brazilian and Puerto Rican *espiritismo* today. Whereas both have a strong healing focus, Brazilian spiritists went a step further and developed spiritist hospitals across the country. Gerald even links the success of spiritism in Brazil to its "religio-therapeutic dimension,"⁵ although this slightly overshadows the other variations across Brazil. The article is divided into three sections. I will begin with outlining the place of *espiritismo* in the religious landscape of Brazil before moving on to the development of spiritist hospitals and explaining how they fit into the wider landscape of Brazilian *espiritismo*, which will also include some ethnographic notes from my visits. The third part explores how *espiritismo* fits into the study of religions, and thus moves from the ethnographic to a theoretical level.

2. *Espiritismo* in the Brazilian Religious Landscape

Espiritismo is included in the national census of Brazil as one of the options when declaring religious affiliation. Although the numbers are rather small for a country with the size of Brazil – 1.3% in 2000 and two per cent in 2010 – they look a little more impressive when considering the country's population.⁶ The small shift between 2000 and 2010 increased the number from 1.4 to 2.5 million in the 2010 census. However, some scholars point out that spiritism is also ticked by some Brazilians to avoid the negative stigma of being associated with an African-derived religion. Brigida Malandrino for instance argues that "spiritism" is an umbrella category in the census for all kinds of traditions in order to prevent the negative perception of "black magic" that is still connected to African-derived religions.⁷

In my book on spirit possession and trance I argued that spiritism is probably the most problematic one to include as many practitioners do not see it as a religion, nor is it an African-derived religion even though it is sometimes listed as such.⁸ Jim Wafer for instance states that

⁵ Hödl, *African and Amerindian Spirits*, p. 329.

⁶ At the time of writing this article, the figures for religious affiliation of the 2022 census have not yet been released.

⁷ Malandrino, *Umbanda*, pp. 39–40.

⁸ Schmidt, *Spirits and Trance*, p. 32.

spiritist communities are accepted as being African-derived “as long as they have a seated *exu* and members who receive the *orixás*.”⁹ However, this is somehow simplistic as it ignores the huge bricolage of traditions practised in Brazil, some of them identified as Umbanda and some as *espiritismo*.¹⁰ Spiritism in Brazil is rooted in the teachings of Kardec and has developed various trajectories – some of them focus on teaching people to develop their mediumistic skills while other emphasise healing, some are more religious, and some more secular with a focus on enabling communication with deceased relatives. One can be simultaneously a spiritist and an agnostic, or a spiritist and a Catholic, as Kardec’s teaching had an affinity to early Christian doctrines.

Kardec’s birth name was Hypolyte Léon Denizard Rivail (1804–1869). He was a schoolteacher who became interested in the idea of communicating with spirits and started to attend seances in Paris. In one of these seances he was identified as a reincarnated spirit of a Druid called Allan Kardec. Subsequently, he used the name in the publication of his many spiritist books that codified ideas for the fledgling spiritist movement. Soon his publications spread through Latin America where his teachings became the foundation of an alternative spirituality. Many Brazilians (as well as Puerto Ricans) refer to spiritism as *kardecismo* to honour him, though in the literature one can find various subcategories such as *baixo espiritismo* (lower spiritism) and *alto espiritismo* (high spiritism).¹¹ However, I find this differentiation rather biased as it indicates a hierarchical order between two versions, with the one containing elements from African-derived religions categorised as lower whereas the one following Kardec’s teachings stronger, are put on a higher place. In addition to this discriminatory perception, the distinction also overlooks the lived reality. There are not just two but endless versions, with numerous vernacular forms and abundant different lived experiences. It is also important to note that there is no exclusivity in the affiliation to specific traditions. One can be a Catholic but also attend spiritist meetings and/or consult the spirits in Umbanda sessions, even attend Candomblé ceremonies on the weekend. Religious practice is not restricted to one tradition but depends on needs and, to some degree, also to availability.

Kardec embedded his teachings into the Christian faith with aspects of other traditions such as Hinduism (e.g., the ideas of reincarnation and karma). However, the Christian frame was based on early Christian teachings as Kardec regarded the Church teachings to be corrupted. He promoted spiritism as the only solution to the social problems of his time which he deemed to

⁹ Wafer, *Taste*, p. 5.

¹⁰ See also Engler, *Umbanda and Hybridity; Umbanda: Africana or Esoterica*.

¹¹ Schmidt, *Spirits and Trance*, p. 33.

have been caused by the consequences of the Industrial Revolution. While Karl Marx (1818–1883) also fought for better social conditions, Kardec rejected Marxism and offered his teaching as an alternative.¹² Nevertheless, due to the critique of the institution of the Church, Kardec’s books were banned in several countries and sometimes even publicly burned (e.g., in Spain). But in spite of the harsh rejection by the Church, his ideas spread through the Catholic colonies in the Americas and his books became valued contraband. They reached Brazil around 1880.¹³ According to Bernardo Lewgoy, it was especially the anti-clerical position that contributed to their popularity among literate Brazilians who were attracted to Kardec’s ideas because of their progressive, positivistic, and free-thinking philosophy.¹⁴ However, the Church was still a dominant power at that time in Brazil, and Kardecists were persecuted until the constitutional separation of Church and State in 1890 after the launch of the new republic.¹⁵ Despite the persecution by the Church and the authorities, spiritist ideas spread through the wider sectors of society due to the social activism most spiritist centres were involved with. As Kardec’s teachings included the notion of doing good deeds, spiritists launched charitable projects such as orphanages and hospitals.¹⁶ Moreover, they were not just establishing hospitals but also began to offer healing.¹⁷ However, this early link between spiritism and healing led to further and severe persecutions as treatments without a medical licence were illegal,¹⁸ even though the state did not offer any medical support in the early years. It did not matter that spiritist healing at that time did not usually involve any invasive procedures or medication but focused on the transfer of energy and cleansing of the aura. Nevertheless, despite the persecution of spiritists by both Church and State, spiritism had a better reputation than the African-derived religions in Brazil, mainly but not only due to the latter’s common practice of animal sacrifice. The public reputation of spiritism increased with Francisco Cândido (Chico) Xavier (1910–2002), who is still regarded as the most famous medium in Brazil – a charismatic leader and national symbol, who is occasionally even compared to Saint Francis of Assisi (1181–1226).¹⁹ Whereas Chico worked predominantly with automatic writing (called *psicografia* in Brazil) to receive communications with spirits of deceased – he became famous

¹² Pérez García, *Spiritism*.

¹³ Lewgoy, *Sincretismo*, p. 211.

¹⁴ Lewgoy, *Sincretismo*, p. 211.

¹⁵ Jensen, *Discourses*, p. 278.

¹⁶ Brown/Bick, *Religion*, p. 79.

¹⁷ Greenfield, *Spirits*, p. 39.

¹⁸ Jensen, *Discourses*, p. 278.

¹⁹ Lewgoy, *Sincretismo*, p. 217.

particularly for his messages from deceased children to their parents – his fame supported the development of a growing number of spiritist hospitals across the country.

3. Spiritist Hospitals in Brazil

Spiritist teachings include the doctrine of helping others and doing good. Charity is an important cornerstone for spiritists whatever path they follow. By helping others, people can achieve progression to a higher level of existence in their next reincarnation. This feature of spiritist teachings prepared the ground for the religio-therapeutic dimension of Brazilian *espiritismo*. Whereas healing and helping others was part of Brazilian spiritism from its inception, it has grown in importance over the last decades. Spiritist healing takes place in different ways, from disobsession (i.e., persuading a spirit to let go and leave a person alone) and cleansing the aura of a client to consultations of the spirit of a medical doctor via a medium to “perform surgery” by the medium incorporating the spirit of a doctor. For example, Dr. Fritz, the spirit of a German medical doctor who featured in various spiritist centres for a while, became rather famous.²⁰ However, he has fallen out of favour recently and has been replaced by other spirits.

An interesting and rather unique development in Brazil is the appearance of spirit hospitals across the country. Each of them is independent and offers different services. Some focus more on mental health whereas other offer cleansing or disobsession. What is particularly striking is their appearance as “regular” hospitals from the outset – at least the ones I visited were nearly identical to ordinary hospitals. When entering them, one has to go to a reception and present their medical history. There is a waiting room for patients and their families, various consultation and treatment rooms, and even an aula for lectures and training sessions. Some also have a prayer room that looks like a hospital chapel. Members of staff are usually dressed in white scrubs, like medical staff in a hospital, and some work in medical centres during the week and volunteer at a spiritist centre in their free time. One can smell disinfectant, and the floors and walls are hygienically sterile. In order to see a specialist, one has to wait and walk through corridors before entering a consultation room, where a consultation treatment can eventually take place – a very familiar procedure for anyone who ever visited a medical centre. But this is where the similarities end. The treatment offered at spiritist hospitals is very different. In addition to spiritist hospitals, I also include here healing sessions offered at spiritist centres across the country although their set-up looks less “medical” than the ones provided at

²⁰ See Greenfield, *Spirits*.

spiritist hospitals. Their main activity often focuses on education, for instance, on training new mediums and offering instruction to interested persons, though they attract higher number of visitors with their healing sessions. In order to illustrate how they function, I include information from my field diary and excerpts from interviews from both a spiritist centre and a spiritist hospital.

The spiritist centre in São Paulo where I attended some healing sessions was located in a small family house in a residential area of the city. Reaching it via public transport is rather complicated, yet most visitors as well as the members of the centre are either local or arrive by car. The centre is led by a married couple who are also mediums. The woman is a very popular medium who channels the spirit of a medical doctor who is regarded as very wise and can be consulted by the clients while her husband leads some of the other healing sessions but can also channel spirits for consultations. They are supported by a group of mediums, some of them also channelling spirits of medical doctors while others are more involved in *passé* rituals that aim to cleanse the aura of negative influences and transfer positive energy. The centre is linked – though only loosely – to one of the Kardecist organisations, the *Federação Espírita Brasileira*. During one of my visits, someone from the *Federação* was present and gave a lecture about Kardecism in the waiting room.

The centre opens its doors usually one evening each month. Patients enter the waiting room where they are asked to complete a short form. When chatting with people in the waiting room I got the impression that most (if not all) of them consulted medical doctors but were not satisfied with the treatment or could not see an improvement in their condition. During the time they must wait, someone usually reads passages from one of Kardec's books or speaks about spiritism. There is water in case it gets too warm; but otherwise, people wait patiently until their names are called upon.

People are called in groups if they want to attend a disobsession or/and *passé* ritual. Afterwards, they can individually enter the treatment room where they will be seen by one of the mediums channelling a spirit of a medical doctor. When I asked whether the same spirits arrive for each session, I was told that this depended on the mediums. Some work for one specific spirit, whereas others channel more than one. However, they also remembered of an evening when no spirit appeared, despite rigorous preparation. The next day, they found out that a natural disaster hit a neighbouring country, and the spirits subsequently apologised that they had to work elsewhere.

Treatment in this centre does not involve touching the body. Instead the aura of the patients is cleansed by passing energy (i.e., *passé* ritual). They are also given guidance about what to

change in their life. The only remedy I saw that was given to patients was specially blessed water. A treatment is also the aforementioned disobsession ritual which focuses on stopping spirits from disturbing people. Usually, four to six individuals are invited together into the room where mediums have already prepared their minds for the session. After reading a passage from one of Kardec's books and sharing some thoughts about spiritism, the patients are asked to sit on chairs in the middle of the room with the mediums sitting around them passing positive energy. However, the main aim of the ceremony is sending disturbing spirits away. The mediums note the presence of spirits in the room that are less developed (i.e., disturbing people), then try to push them away or persuade them to leave, not just the person they are attached to but their present level of existence. They are reminded that they need to move on so that they can reincarnate on a higher level of existence. These disobsession rituals are rather different from the one-to-one consultations with mediums channelling spirits of medical doctors. There is a rather intense energy in the room and sometimes people start to cry or get agitated. One of the mediums of the centre will look after them and, if necessary, guide them out of the room. It reminded me of previous encounters with spiritists in Puerto Rico where I also observed great kindness and care for people. Whenever mediums noted that a comment they had transmitted from spirits upset someone, they tried to explain it in a way that would calm them. But feeling the energy can also have a cathartic outcome and thereby initiate healing. The individual consultations however focus on particular problems. Although I did not experience a specific problem during my visits at the centre, I also consulted the mediums. I was asked to lay on the hospital bed and two mediums stood on each side. Holding their hands over my body, I assumed initially it was a *passe*, i.e., passing of energy. However, it was also a way to check my body for any problem, and I got some advice (specifically, about my back) afterwards.

The spiritist hospital I visited in Santa Catarina sometime later was different, despite following a similar pattern. While I was unable to enter the hospital as a patient, I conducted a lengthy interview with the founder and was also walked through the premises with him. The main difference from the spiritist centre was the sheer size of the hospital, which looked like a modern hospital from the outside. One enters into a large reception area with several admission cubicles where every new patient has to present their medical history including a note from their doctors. Within the building there is a corridor leading to consultation and treatment rooms, as well as meeting spaces used for other forms of treatment such as yoga and meditation. I was told that approximately 2,000 patients are treated every week. There was also a lecture theatre used for meetings as well as training for the volunteers and staff. One part of the lecture

theatre looked like a small chapel in a hospital, although the building overall did not look look at all like a religious facility, but rather like a middle-sized ordinary hospital where surgeons, clinicians, and other staff members work.

However, the differentiation between a spiritist and a non-spiritist hospital is challenging. To call one “secular” would imply that the other is “religious,” which would go against the self-classification of the people working at or visiting the place. The same can be said about the labels “ordinary” and “non-ordinary.”²¹ These categories carry meanings applied to them often from a Eurocentric perspective. I visited this spiritist hospital during my research on spirit possession and trance,²² and my aim when interviewing the president of the hospital was to gain his understanding of their practice. However, as he made it very clear from the outset, the various labels for the practice do not actually work. Whether I was asking about spirit possession or incorporation, he replied that they “do not exist.” While the mediums work with spirits in order to treat patients, none of them would incorporate a spirit. It is even forbidden to channel a spirit in front of patients, although it takes place in classes for mediums so that the connection between a medium and the spiritual world would get stronger. This is indeed in line with Kardec’s teachings, as he himself declared that spirits cannot enter the human body, hence spirit possession does not exist.

A Spirit does not enter a body as you enter a house. It assimilates itself with an incarnate Spirit that has the same defects and the same qualities, in order to act jointly. But it is always the incarnate Spirit that acts as it wills on the material with which it is clothed. No Spirit can take the place of another that is incarnated, because the Spirit and the body are linked during the period of material existence.²³

In a similar manner, the president of the hospital insisted that to receive a spirit would be a waste of time:

Nobody came to this world to receive the spirit of a third being. We came here for our spirit, and what is our spirit, is our truth, our obligations, the ethics that we must learn to live together. Usually people do not want to know more, they want to come here to receive a spirit. [...] They are talking about a future life, or they are talking about a past

²¹ Schmidt, *Mediumship*.

²² Schmidt, *Spirits and Trance*.

²³ Kardec, *Spirits' Book*, p. 473.

life. But no one can really say anything about it because nobody knows. [...] We will just lose time. [...] We do not believe in a spirit that speaks. [...] Working with spirits [mediumship] is very difficult. So we have a separate group dedicated to developing guidelines for working with spirits, but not for one person. The spirits do not reveal anything about a person. They have no such right to do so because there is free will. They cannot say, “Do this or do that.” The most they can do is help the doctor make a proper diagnosis and advise the patient well, so that the patient feels compelled to take the medication, modify their diet, modify their habits, improve and be happy. None of this comes via incorporation. The merger is a primary process in psychic development. Let’s say we have a range of therapeutic possibilities to help someone. The merger is the last, the very last option we would use.²⁴

Hence, one would develop into a superhuman via a permanent merger with a spirit, something no spirit would want to risk. Instead, spirits want to instruct humans to evolve. Nevertheless, halfway into my interview, he even said that he incorporated a spirit early on in his life but decided that this was not the right way:

Well at first, 30 years ago, I received the spirit of a doctor, Dr. Savas. [...] But I had no one who could help me to understand the incorporation. I had to make my own diagnosis, perform the treatment and do the surgery. But over time the system was changed. [...] Otherwise I would have been transformed into a super-doctor, a super-creature, and this is not good. [...] The spirits of light, the spirits that have a certain level of evolution, do not recommend this kind of work. Incorporation happens. But not to attend an individual patient, but to give guidelines to a hospital that serves 2,000 patients per month. “Better is this, the better way to do is this, do this, prepare that, take certain hours of lectures, go to the anatomy class at the university, call a psychologist, a sociologist” and so on. [...] It works by directing the system and not by incorporating in a person.²⁵

Despite this rigorous rejection of incorporation, he – like other spiritists – received communication from his guiding spirit via automatic writing (*psicografia*). These were not

²⁴ Interview on May 5, 2010.

²⁵ Interview on May 5, 2010.

messages for specific people from spirits of deceased relatives like the ones Chico Xavier channelled,²⁶ but teachings from his “guardian angel,” whom he described as a highly evolved spirit, a spirit of light, who has important instruction for us humans.

The spirits do not reveal anything about a person. They have no such right to do so because there is free will. They cannot say “do this or do that.” The most they can do is enlighten the doctor for a proper diagnosis and to give us a good lecture, so that the patient feels compelled to take the medication, modify the diet, modify their habits, improve and be happy. None of this comes via incorporation. The merger is a primary process in psychic development. Let’s say we have a range of therapeutic possibilities to help someone. The merger is the last, the very last chances we launched there.²⁷

This discussion unveils another aspect of the spiritist hospital. In addition to treating patients, it offers training programmes for mediums like many Kardecist centres do across Brazil. The aim of this training is to develop their mediumship abilities as well as cultivate themselves intellectually. This can be seen as not just another educational service, but also as therapy – though not a spiritual one – for treating patients. Helmar Kurz, for instance, did an extensive ethnographic study in a spiritist hospital in Marília, Brazil, where patients with mental problems were treated. He describes the Hospital Espírita de Marília as “one of several psychiatric hospitals in Brazil, which are administrated by Spiritist associations but that also affiliate with the public health-care system.”²⁸ Patients are cared for within a secular context but also offered spiritist treatment such as *passé*, the transfer of energy, or the development of mediumship faculties. He points out that the co-operation of spiritist healing techniques into the daily routine is not practised in all hospitals, rather the integration of spiritist and medical treatment takes place across the country.²⁹

4. The Place of *espiritismo* in the Study of Religions

In this section I shift my focus from the ethnographic level to that of the wider theoretical frame and reflect on *espiritismo* within the Study of Religion. Notably, Steven Engler defends its place in the field. He argues that while Kardecists in several countries refer to their tradition as

²⁶ Silva, *Chico Xavier*.

²⁷ Interview on May 5, 2010.

²⁸ Kurz, *Voices*, p. 28.

²⁹ Kurz, *Depression*.

a philosophy and not as a religion, the president of the *Federação Espírita Brasileira* recommended to members to report spiritism as their religion in the national census.³⁰ Yet, despite its inclusion in the census, the main aim of spiritism is healing both humans and spirits. Thereby, spiritism has a more therapeutic outlook than a religious one, although there are spiritist churches in most towns. One can concurrently be a spiritist, work as a medium, and identify as an agnostic. Additionally, one can even practise a different religion and be a spiritist. Whereas most Brazilian spiritists adhere to Christian beliefs, this is not compulsory. Some even emphasise the secular nature of their practice of spiritism as I previously indicated when presenting the spiritist hospital. What is then the place of spiritism in the study of religions? This question opens the floodgate to endless problems about disciplinary boundaries as well as the definition of our area of study. Spiritists insist that spiritism is a technique, means of communication, the way to receive instructions from the spirit world. The vast majority do not declare spiritism as their religion; they even reject the idea that it has anything to do with religion. Instead, it is seen as secular (despite the existence of some spiritist churches in Brazil). The emphasis is on both education and studying the core literature, such as Kardec's books. Also, the communication with the spiritual world often centres on receiving instructions, although more practical help is possible as the example of the spiritist centre in Sao Paulo has shown. But even then, the mediums work with so-called evolved spirits (such as medical doctors). The communication with spirits of deceased relatives is not at the core of *espiritismo*, although it is not that uncommon as indicated by Chico Xavier's fame.³¹ Whereas spiritism is an option for religious affiliation in the national census of Brazil – with a growing number of persons ticking the related box – sociologists speculate that there are many followers of African-derived religions among them who tick this box in order to avoid the negative stigma of their practice.³² Lewgoy argues that Brazilian spiritism has developed two different strands, one more scientific that led to spiritist hospitals, and one more mystical that fed into Chico Xavier's communication with the spirits of deceased children, although ultimately he maintains that spiritism became a secular religion (*religião laica da ordem*) that promoted evolution by individual merit.³³

We have therefore a system of ideas and teachings that highlights a secular worldview, which consists nevertheless of a human level of existence and a world of spirits, the latter usually seen

³⁰ Engler, *Kardecism*.

³¹ For instance, Stoll, *Espiritismo*.

³² Malandrino, *Umbanda*.

³³ Lewgoy, *Sincretismo*, p. 213.

as having a religious connotation. Sydney Greenfield writes that Brazilian healers represent “a new imagery for the healing sciences.”³⁴ Acknowledging the difficulties to make sense of the spiritist healing, he traces the problem of embracing the spiritist explanation “to the beginnings of science and its effort to separate itself from religion.”³⁵ He argues that we strictly separate the supernatural and the natural in the West, with religious beliefs belonging to the former and healing and medicine to the latter. “Cartesian science excluded whatever was placed in the category supernatural from scientific examination.”³⁶ However, the mediums working in spiritist hospitals reject this separation and argue that spirits intervene in the universe on a regular basis which causes problems that spiritist healers can address. Following this strand challenges the differentiation between religion and the secular. One can even argue that spiritist hospitals are a perfect example of the breakdown of the religious-secular distinctions that are “crucial to the way in which modern governments have rationalised their governance and marked out their sovereignty—as crucial as the territorial boundaries that they have drawn around nations.”³⁷ Kim Knott rightly argues for the importance to expand our area of research into the domain of “non-religion to include an examination of the ‘secular’ as well as the ‘religious’.”³⁸ In this regard, spiritist hospitals could be seen as secular, but spiritism still as part of the study of religions.

Although I do not want to enforce an academic label on people who reject this term, I agree with Thomas Csordas’s reflection that the question of what is religious is more an ethnographic than a theoretical problem. Following Émile Durkheim’s (1858–1917) definition of the sacred as “something radically other,” Csordas argues:

The *sui generis* nature of the sacred is defined not by the capacity to have such experiences, but by the human propensity to thematize them as radically other. With this conception, the question of what is religious about religious healing can be posed, since the sacred is operationalized by the criterion of the “other.” However, since otherness is a characteristic of human consciousness rather than of an objective reality, anything can be perceived as “other” depending on the conditions and configuration of circumstances, so that defining the sacred becomes an ethnographic problem.³⁹

³⁴ Greenfield, *Spirits*, p. 167.

³⁵ Greenfield, *Spirits*, p. 157.

³⁶ Greenfield *Spirits*, p. 159.

³⁷ Stark, *Introduction*, p. 1.

³⁸ Knott, *Resources*, p. 133.

³⁹ Csordas, *Embodiment*, p. 34.

As the spiritist worldview is based on the relationship between the world of the living and that of the spirits,⁴⁰ it operates indeed within the ultimate otherness, and falls consequently into the religious realm, though with a unique profile as Maria Laura Viveiros de Castro Cavalcanti highlights.

Dramatizing the tension between free will and determinism to the extreme, Spiritism features a unique profile within the Brazilian religious realm. It simultaneously constructs fabulous, imaginary, active worlds where the living and the dead constantly communicate, and counterbalances this fabled vision, which feeds in the Beyond, with a variation of the ethics of intra-world action, by placing incarnate life in the unique privileged place of **probation**, of gradual construction of **free will**, of the sense of responsibility for every action and behaviour, of **merit** and **blame**. Thus, an individual will have to evoke the whole universe inhabited by spirits in order to live his own life, as Chico Xavier exemplarily did.⁴¹

However, in addition to the reluctance of some spiritists to identify spiritism as a religious system, some scholars are also hesitant to categorise *espiritismo* as a religion. I remember that when I gave my first paper about Puerto Rican spiritism at an anthropological conference, I was challenged on my definition of religion by an eminent anthropologist of religion. It took me by surprise as I never limited my understanding of religion to organised or institutionalised traditions. Quite the opposite, I always assumed that anthropologists of religions are guided in our approach to religion by what people do and not what religious institutions teach. In the end, I included in my Ph.D. research a very wide definition of religion but subsequently made the distinction between “undogmatic” and “dogmatic religions” to highlight the different understanding of religion. Nevertheless, this differentiation does not signify that spiritism has no level of organisation. On the contrary, every group is organised, just not in a church-like structure. Ann Taves and Michael Kinsella made a similar observation regarding spiritualism in the USA.⁴² Discussing the term “unorganised religion,” they point out that even spiritualism, which is regarded as such, has a certain degree of organisational structures.

⁴⁰ Cavalcanti, *Life and Death*, p. 4.

⁴¹ Cavalcanti, *Life and Death*, pp. 11–12 (emphasis in original).

⁴² Taves/Kinsella, *Hiding in Plain Sight*.

Whereas our field moved on since these early days of research on spiritism, the boundary of the study of religions can still be a controversial topic, in particular towards traditions without a firm doctrine that outlines their beliefs. The study of spirituality, New Age, and indigenous religions are three areas that challenge that boundary. For instance, Wouter Hanegraaff argues that the problem with the study of religions today is that we failed to distance our field from “belief.” Instead, the study of religions is still led by the understanding of the word “religion” and the associations it evokes among the general population who regard “religions” as “church-like religious organisations (whether larger or smaller) and their collective beliefs, traditions, and practices.”⁴³ Hanegraaff’s solution is the rebranding of the study of religions in such a way that its focus shifts stronger to the individual and their personal experiences and practices. Hanegraaff rightly points out that what others define as spirituality refers to types of religion, hence comes into our realm of study. Although he adds that he does not disregard the collective dimensions, he emphasises that a stronger shift towards spirituality could solve the struggle we are facing in the study of religions. James Cox puts forward a similar point in his critique of the ongoing dominance of teaching so-called “World Religions” within the study of religions which overshadowed the vitality of indigenous religions.⁴⁴ But Cox does not only highlight the importance to treat all religions, including indigenous traditions, alongside global religions; he also points towards the significance of locality over universal categories: “By affirming local agency in the study of Indigenous Religions, the World Religions Paradigm is undermined by giving priority to contextualized, local knowledge over generalized, often empirically untraceable, universal comparative categories.”⁴⁵ Steven Sutcliffe goes even further in his challenge of the authority of the “world religion” taxonomy. Together with Ingvild Saelid Gilhus they point out that “religion does not exist in a pure form in cultural processes” as one can see when looking at empirical data of religion which is “impure and reactive and potentially mix with everything else.”⁴⁶ Any separation thus becomes artificial and unstable. These scholars show the importance of looking at religions from an empirical, practical dimension instead of restricting the study of religions to universal definitions and categories. If we remove any distinction between religion and the secular, or religion and spirituality, there can be no question about the place of spiritism within the study of religions.

⁴³ Hanegraaff, *Future*, p. 79.

⁴⁴ Cox, *From Primitive*.

⁴⁵ Cox, *Responses*, p. 113.

⁴⁶ Sutcliffe/Gilhus, *Introduction*, p. 12.

5. Conclusion

As Knott writes, “religious belief and practice is generally thought to be and represented as the norm.”⁴⁷ However, the model for such thinking in the West are global religions, overlooking the diverse religious practices across the world. Brazilian *espiritismo* presents an ideal case to support the argument for an expansion of the category religion. As the honouree of this *Festschrift* has done in his work, spiritism is part of the religious landscape of both Brazil as well as other countries.⁴⁸ Does it matter that *espiritismo* does not fit traditional definitions of the “religious”? Shall we avoid using labels such as “religious,” “non-religious,” and “secular” all together as Trevor Stark suggests,⁴⁹ and explore what is at the core of our discipline? Or shall we follow Hanegraaff who insists “that we must ask ourselves deep and perhaps uncomfortable questions about why it really is that we do what we do and why it is that we find it important.”⁵⁰ As he rightly points out, the study of religions is part of the humanities and the social sciences.⁵¹ If we take the sacred out of the category of religion, as Cox argues,⁵² and expand the category to include all types of traditions, such as esotericism and *espiritismo*, we might begin to deconstruct the foundation myth of the study of religions and begin to decolonise our discipline – something that is long overdue.

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⁴⁷ Knott, *Resources*, p. 115.

⁴⁸ Hödl, *African and Amerindian Spirits*, p. 320.

⁴⁹ Stark, *Introduction*, p. 6.

⁵⁰ Hanegraaf, *Future*, p. 79.

⁵¹ Hanegraaf, *Future*, p. 72.

⁵² Cox, *Separating*.

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